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THE LEADING WESTERN MAGAZINE

APRIL

THE SAGA OF THE OUTLAW KID

A GREAT NOVEL OF LAWLESS MEN

by WALT COBURN

DANE GREGORY • TOM ROAN
LLOYD ERIC REEVE • AND OTHERS

TWO VIVIDLY DIFFERENT NOVELETTES

TOMAHAWK FROM BOSTON

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10¢ DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

MAY ISSUE PUBLISHED APRIL 1st!

VOLUME XXXII | APRIL, 1942 | NUMBER 4

Complete Western Novel

The Saga of the Outlaw Kid.....Walt Coburn 10
Only that tough young renegade called the Outlaw Kid knew that the bitter Matthews-Dawson range feud was a cover-up for one of the biggest, bald-faced cattle-steals in the Montana cow-country. . . . But there'd be no one to share that dangerous secret in the cold and sudden grave that awaited him. . . .

Two Complete Western Novelettes

Wild One!.....Robert E. Mahaffay 62
To save from useless, brutal death that flashingly glorious wild stallion, must Brant Logan doom himself to be hunted through that hell's back-yard of badlands by a posse of badge-toting killers?

Tomahawk from Boston.....William R. Cox 92
Never in the incredible annals of that bloodstained buckskin Santa Fe Trail had a stranger greenhorn embarked on a more deadly mission. . . . For Zeb Stillwell was a Boston gentleman, who killed his men with a ruthless efficiency only equalled by his irreproachable manners. . . .

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—And—

In the Saddle.....A Department 6
The keynote for real Westerners was—and is—action!

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H. Clay Pleasants brought scattergun peace to bloody DeWitt County, Texas.

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A true experience of special policeman FRANK HAHNEL, *New York, N. Y.*

"IT WAS STILL DARK...and bitter cold on the waterfront...when I finished my night patrol," writes Mr. Hahnel. "I had paused for a moment to say hello to a couple of friends when above the dismal sounds of the river came a piercing shriek and a heavy splash. Then there was silence.

"WE RUSHED FOR THE WHARF. I yanked out my flashlight and turned it on the water. There in the icy river 14 feet below we saw a man struggling feebly... clawing at the ice-sheathed pilings as the out-racing tide sucked him away from the pier.

"QUICKLY I DARTED my light about and located a length of line on a nearby barge...and a life preserver on an adjoining pier. In an instant the preserver splashed in the water beside the drowning man. Dazed from shock and cold, half clinging to the preserver and half lassoed by the line, he was dragged to safety. Thanks to my 'Eveready' flashlight and its dependable *fresh* DATED batteries the river was cheated of its victim. *(Signed)* Frank J. Hahnel"

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UCC

IN THE SADDLE

WE WERE talking about Westerners the other day with some friends, and the question came up as to what was the outstanding characteristic of the men and women who helped to settle the frontier when it was raw, wild and tough.

There was, one of our friends pointed out, the instinctive love of fair play and good sportsmanship—of giving every man an even break and living up to a self-imposed code of conduct which seems a native trait of your real Westerner.

Someone else mentioned the open-handed generosity—the willingness to help a neighbor, even though that neighbor might live half a county distant—which also is certainly part and parcel of the Westerner's make-up. And courage—both the type of courage that makes a man grit his teeth and turn an all but hopeless fight into victory, and the kind of bravery that makes a lone ranch woman rise above the years of back-breaking work, of facing savage Indian raids, torturing drouth when cattle pitifully dropped dead of thirst; or the cold fury of lashing blizzard. . . . They were among the thousand-and-one everyday perils which had to be met cheerfully, with perseverance and an abiding faith in the land itself. . . .

From the time of the buckskin-clad explorers, mountain men, or traders, through the era of the cattle and trail-drive days; the forging of a steel empire which was to reach its completion at Promontory Rock, Utah, through the period of the Concord coaches, the old Butterfield or Overland trails, right up to the present day, those men of the West have upheld all the traditions of the old Frontier dynamically and forcefully.

There are such things as the settlement of the Northern cattle ranges, when a million cloven hoofs stirred up the dust along the Trails; in the days of the young Texas Republic, when a handful of embattled fighting men made that immortal last stand at the Alamo; yes, and in the changing of an oven-hot dry desert bed to the rich and fertile farms that surround Salt Lake City. . . .

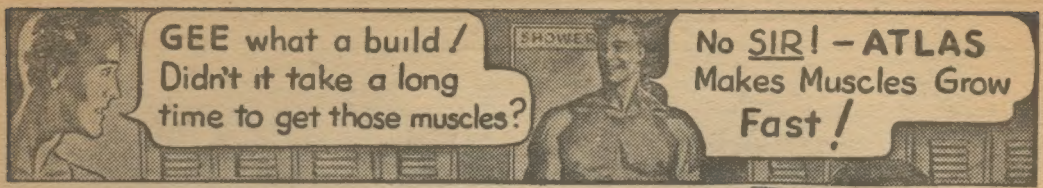
It was a tough land, and only tough, two-fisted men survived in it.

For example, in the next issue you'll find Rick Candleman, in T. T. Flynn's novelette "Those Fighting Gringo Devils," to be typical of the kind of hard-fighting fast-moving Westerner who gave of their energies and often their lives to bring some sort of security to that wild territory.

Let's have a brief preview of this story, when Rick returns to the Iron Hat range after years spent in exile as a hunted man . . .

> Before the stage had got him to Laguna, trouble was breaking in his face. The stage guard's roaring shotgun was the signal.
>
> Rifles among the rocks answered the guard's gun. A bullet dropped one of the four stage horses. The tangled mêlée in the harness brought the stage to swerving, reeling stop. The girl sitting opposite Rick exclaimed under her breath as they heard the swearing driver fight the reins.

(Continued on page 8)



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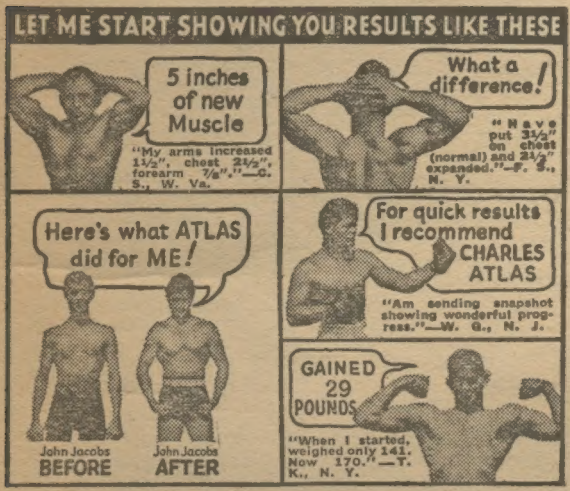
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I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

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(Continued from page 6)

Beside Rick a blocky, broad-shouldered cowman reached under his coat.

"Better not, friend," Rick warned quickly. "They mean business. We got a lady here."

The cowman blurted, "Hell! Don't sit there. Grab a gun!"

"Haven't got a gun. You'll have it all to swing alone—and have us all shot up, too, if you play it like this!"

A wizened drummer sat with open mouth. The cowman glared at Rick. The girl eyed Rick intently. She wasn't afraid, Rick decided. He might have expected that she'd have courage from the coppery-red glint of her hair.

The body of the shotgun guard rolled from the box into the road. The cowman got up and looked, and the fight went out of him as he sank heavily back.

"Couple of rifles lined on us from over in the rocks," Rick said, looking out. "Only one man's showing himself."

One outlaw was already running out from the rocks to the stage. He carried a hand gun, wore a shapeless yellow slicker in the blistering heat. He knew what he was about.

"Toss down that Laguna box," he yelled to the driver.

The driver's voice cut through the dust. "Ain't no bank box for you this trip."

"One started from the railroad. It better hit the ground fast, or the boys'll open up. Half a minute's all you get."

"Half a minute's too long, damn you! Ain't no box here for killers!"

The redheaded girl said suddenly, "They'll kill the driver if he keeps stubborn. And maybe us too." She was off the seat as she spoke. "I'll stop it. If he won't tell them, I will!"

Rick caught her arm as she opened the door. She jerked away and stepped quickly out into the open. Rick followed her, cursing softly. This was hair-trigger business. She could make it worse with a word.

"The old carpet bag on top was heavy enough to have gold in it," she said rapidly, stepping away from the stage and pointing up to the top.

The six-shooter in the man's hand was leveled at Rick. The gunman chuckled behind his mask.

"If every stage carried somethin' as pretty and helpful as you, lady, this job would be a cinch!"

The driver threw down the bag. Dust spurted as it landed heavily at the foot of the dead man. The gunman kicked the bag, nodding.

"You saved the stubborn old coot's skin. Set over there on the rock, while he cuts out the dead horse and rolls on."

She started to obey, then stopped at Rick's cold voice. "The lady's going with us."

"She traveling with you?" the gunman asked.

Rick nodded. "Riding the stage with us."

"She *was*, you mean. Git back in there. The lady's stayin'."

Rick hesitated, shrugged, climbed back into the stage and slammed the door. And without sitting down he snapped under his breath to the blocky cowman, "Gimme that gun—*quick!*"

Startled, the man reached under his coat. Rick caught the gun from his hand, turned quickly in the cramped space between the seats, drove the stage door open, and plunged out—into what was very likely to be the end of Rick Candleman. . . .

Rick, however lived on—after one of the toughest fights with the stage-robbers it has ever been our fortune to read. But when the girl took a hand in the battle—strangely to side the robbers!—Rick found himself in the tightest spot he had ever before known—even for a man whose life had been dedicated to swift and violent action. This story brings back all the hard-hitting movement that was characteristic of the old frontier at its wildest. . .

Walt Coburn will appear with another one of his authentic fast-paced novelettes of the Border, "Wet Cattle—Hot Guns!" . . . And Harry F. Olmsted, in his novel, "The Tornado from Texas," will give a refreshingly and powerfully dramatic saga of war and high adventure in the old Panhandle. Those three stories—plus short stories and features by Tom Roan, Bart Cassidy and others, will make the Western fiction fare for the May issue. . . .

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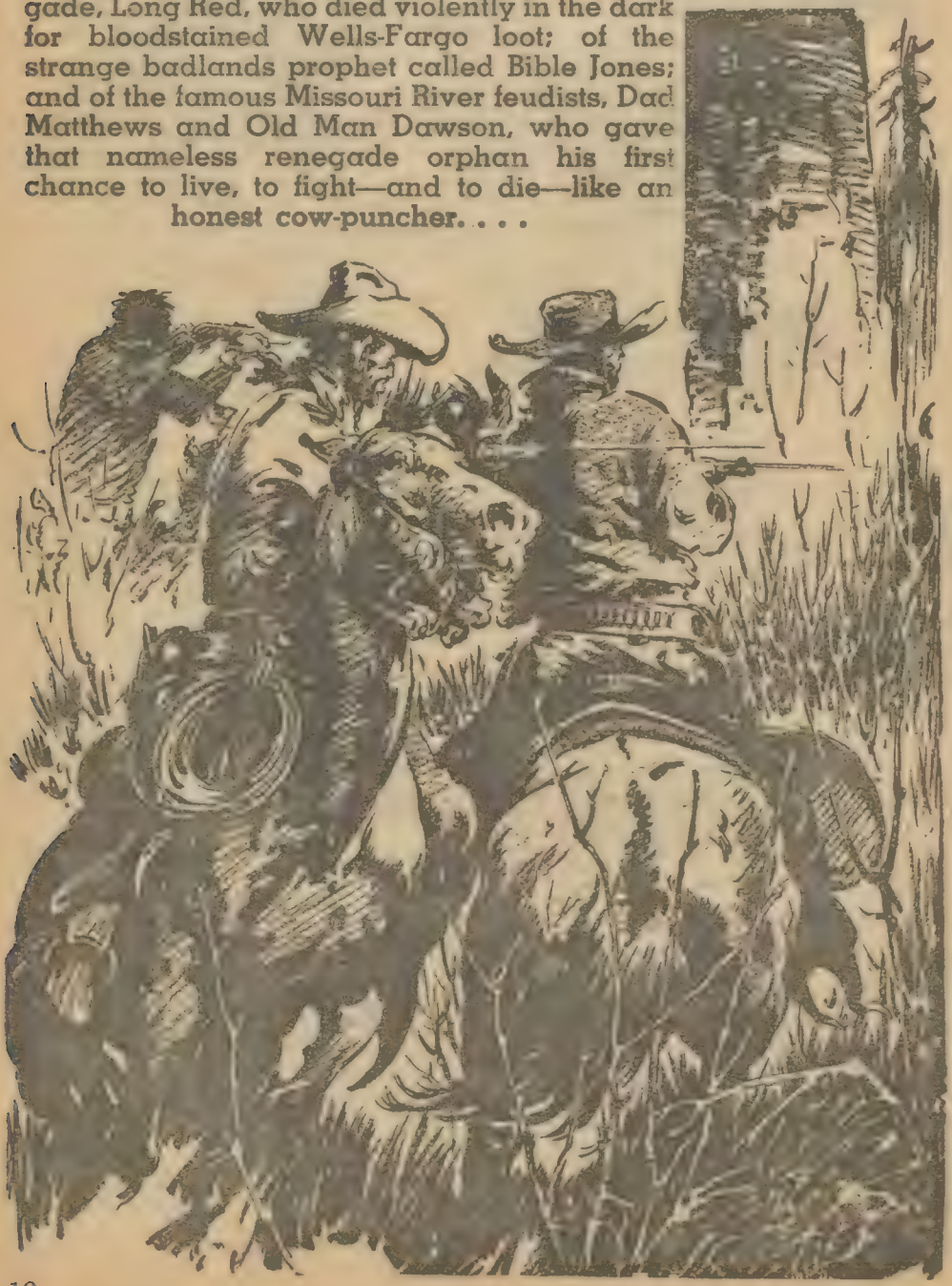
Novel of the Missouri River Cow-Country

The rustling of the leaves along the Old Outlaw Trail may still whisper the Saga of the Outlaw Kid. . . . Of the murderous renegade, Long Red, who died violently in the dark for bloodstained Wells-Fargo loot; of the strange badlands prophet called Bible Jones; and of the famous Missouri River feudists, Dad Matthews and Old Man Dawson, who gave that nameless renegade orphan his first chance to live, to fight—and to die—like an honest cow-puncher. . . .



THE OUTLAW KID

By WALT COBURN

Rale and his Dawson cousins figured they might have to make a fast getaway. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

"Ask Bible Jones!"

WHEN the Outlaw Kid was about twelve or fourteen, he'd sometimes hide out in the brush and watch Long Red. On those occasions he'd wonder how it was possible that the man could be his flesh-and-blood father. For Long Red was everything that the boy hated and despised and held in bitter contempt. He was a thief, a cold-blooded murderer, a liar and a cheat. And sometimes a coward.

There were plenty of other men, even renegades, like Long Red, whom the boy liked better and respected more than he did this man who'd given him nothing but abuse since he could remember.

Once, when he asked Long Red what

his real name was, the long geared, red-headed outlaw tied him up to a tree limb by his wrists and worked him over with a loaded rawhide quirt until he tore the shirt from the boy's back and left his tender white hide in bloody strips.

"I got no name, you whinin' young whelp," Long Red had told him when he cut him down from the tree limb, "What makes you think you got a right to ary name? You was born in an outlaw camp where men don't have names."

And after that the Outlaw Kid quit asking questions. But he did a lot of listening, and he remembered most of what he heard and stored it away in his memory and that was a big part of his education.

Somehow he learned to read and write and add up figures. He got so that he knew every brand and earmark in that part of the cow-country that is crossed by the long Outlaw Trail that twists its mysterious way from the Canadian Line to the Mexican Border. And for arithmetic he could range-count cattle and horses or estimate bunches of stock with an uncanny precision. He read everything from the almanac to mail order catalogs, from old newspapers to a cheaply bound Bible left at Robbers Roost one time by Bible Jones.

Bible Jones was a man who roamed the cow-country, Long Red said, like a lost spirit kicked out of hell. He peddled Bibles in the cow-towns, preached funeral sermons for men who died with their boots on, performed marriage ceremonies, got on lonesome drunks and spent his sober days and nights between drunks loudly repentant. Bible Jones was tolerated along the Outlaw Trail because there is a sort of superstitious streak among those lawless cowpuncher outlaws, and the worst of them called it bad luck to abuse a man like Bible Jones. The toughest, most calloused of the renegades had to respect the sincerity of that black-clad man they would ride up on at unexpected places and times, kneeling with an open Bible beside the unmarked grave of a nameless outlaw.

Long Red hated Bible Jones. Hated him with what seemed to be an unreasoning and insane violence. So the Outlaw Kid dared not even speak to the preacher. When Bible Jones spent a week at Robbers Roost, the Bible peddler and the boy had exchanged no more than half a dozen furtive bits of talk. But when the Outlaw Kid pawed through the stuff in his canvas warsack for a clean pair of socks he found one of Bible Jones' Bibles wrapped in a shirt, and he stowed in the spare clothes and odds and ends he carried in the canvas sack.

After that, whenever Long Red left him alone at some hidden camp, the Outlaw Kid would get out that little Bible and puzzle out its text. And into his cow country vocabulary came a sprinkling of ancient words and phrases.

The Outlaw Kid was about fifteen when Long Red tied him up by the wrists and quirted him. That was the day the boy told himself that he was going to kill Long Red.

He got chances enough to kill the man who must be his flesh-and-blood father. There were those times when the Outlaw Kid hid out in the brush with a six-shooter or saddle gun, watching, studying the man.

And Long Red drunk and just back from town, like as not with a bullet nick or knife-rip in his tough hide, nibbling at his jug, fumbling drunkenly with bandages, cursing the boy who was not there. He looked for all the world like a green-eyed, gaunt red wolf licking its wounds.

The Outlaw Kid could have killed Long Red. Sometimes he wondered why he did not line the sights of his carbine and pull the trigger and put an end to the man he hated and despised.

It might have been that Bible passage that read: "Thou shalt not kill."

But the Outlaw Kid reckoned that was only a part of the reason.

"I'm waitin'," he told himself a thousand times. "I got to wait."

"Why? Why do you have to wait? Why do you keep on takin' his damned abuse?" he'd question himself, his finger on the trigger of a six-shooter he could use better than most men.

"Damned if I know. The sign ain't right. Wait. . . ."

Six years. Then it came. But not by the way of any of the Outlaw Kid's planning.

IT WAS a month, maybe two months after the train hold-up in Utah. Long Red and four other renegades had been in it, and the Outlaw Kid had held the horses in a brush patch a little ways from the railroad tracks.

After that the outlaws had split up. They were to meet at the ranch at Brown's Hole near that point where the corners of Utah, Colorado and Wyoming join. There they were to divide the loot from the robbery—the sacks of registered mail, and the gunnysacks that held what they had taken from the Wells Fargo box in the express car.

They met at the 2 Bar ranch, five men and the Outlaw Kid who was grown to man's size and treated, for the most part, as a man. They'd ridden through the badlands in pairs; Long Red and the Outlaw Kid, the two Barker brothers, Slim Green and Heavy Carter.

Long Red and the Outlaw Kid were the first to reach the deserted ranch. The Outlaw Kid leaned from his saddle and pulled the wooden pin that held the pole gate shut while Long Red watched warily, his six-shooter in his hand. He was afraid of a bushwhack trap, not trusting the other outlaws, not trusting the ranch owners who had been advised to "ride to town."

But no guns blazed from the log house nor from the shed on the right of the gate, nor from the sod-roofed log barn at the left. They put up their horses and waited.

They stayed in the barn with their saddled horses and waited. Long Red was a little drunk and ugly. When they sighted the two Barker brothers riding toward the pole gate that the Outlaw Kid had closed behind him, Long Red took a quick drink and crouched beside the partly open barn door, his carbine ready.

"Take the one that opens the gate," he whispered huskily. "I'll gut-shoot the other 'un."

The Outlaw Kid had moved over into a vacant stall next to the stall that held his horse. It was pitch black but he could make out Long Red's silhouette against the patch of moonlight of the partly open door.

"I ain't murderin' nobody, Red," he called flatly. "Neither are you. Step out there like a man or I'll kill you. I aim to kill you tonight, before I ride out of Brown's Hole. I got 'er made, Long Red. Don't crowd your luck."

"You bald-faced yaller whelp!"

"Step out into the moonlight, Long Red."

The Outlaw Kid had never killed a man. But there was something in the flat dry tone of his voice that told the red-haired outlaw the boy was not fooling. He stepped out, his carbine in the crook of his arm, as one of the Barkers opened the gate and they rode through.

Then Slim Green and Heavy Carter loomed up out of the moonlight and black shadow patches. They rode in through the gateway.

Something about the way the four outlaws sat their horses, the way their hatbrims slanted, the angle of their gun arms, warned the Outlaw Kid.

Long Red was standing just outside the barn doorway. The Outlaw Kid was still in the barn. He reached out, grabbed Long Red's sagging cartridge belt at the back, and yanked hard.

Long Red's six feet three length came over backwards and sprawled on the dirt floor of the barn as the guns of the four outlaws came into sight spitting streaks of fire. The Outlaw Kid kicked the door shut as Long Red scrambled to his feet.

The windows in the barn were square holes through which hay could be shoved from the outside. They were fitted with heavy slab coverings swung from the top on leather hinges.

The Outlaw Kid stood near one of those windows now, his saddle gun streaking fire. Long Red crouched near the other hole, his carbine spewing a deadly flame.

The gun-fight was over in less than a couple of minutes. Three dead men lay sprawled on the ground. Three riderless horses snorted and jumped and stepped on trailing bridle reins. One man rode out through the open gateway into the night, lying low across the horn of his saddle, his horse spurred to a run.

The Outlaw Kid had saved Long Red's life. Instead of his belly being torn apart by the four outlaw guns, he had escaped the hail of bullets with no more than a badly torn left thigh. But the pain of the flesh wound, the rotgut whiskey that fired his brain, coupled with his ornery,

perverse temper, turned him on the Outlaw Kid now, with snarling abuse.

"It's you and me, Long Red!" The Outlaw Kid's voice cut like a steel blade through the man's foul-tongued abuse. "Start shootin'!"

Their six-shooters roared loudly inside the dark barn. Then through the crashing echoes sounded the voice of Long Red.

"You got me, Kid. Like you bin itchin' to. I'm dyin' fast. . . . I'm a goner. You killed me. . . . Now you kin go back where I taken you from, in Wyoming. I ain't your father. You're kin to Dawson, kin to Matthews. . . . Ask Bible Jones. . . ."

Long Red's voice choked, rattled in his throat. Then the only sound in the sod-roofed log barn was the restless moving of their two saddled horses in their stalls.

Long Red was dead. Out yonder in the moonlight lay the bodies of Slim Green, Heavy Carter and Seth Barker. Blucher Barker had gotten away from that gun-ruckus alive.

The Outlaw Kid had not been marked by a single bullet. He led his horse and Long Red's out of the barn. He unsaddled Long Red's horse and turned it loose. Then he caught, unsaddled and turned loose the horses belonging to the other three dead outlaws.

THERE were the registered mail sacks, and the two partly filled gunnysacks from the train robbery. The Outlaw Kid untied them from the four saddles. He did not know whether or not Blucher Barker had gotten away with any of the train robbery loot. He wasn't caring much, one way or another.

A relay change of fresh horses had been left here at the 2 Bar ranch for the outlaw gang. The Outlaw Kid threw his saddle on a fresh horse. He found a pack saddle and cinched it on another relay horse. Then found a bed tarp and rigged the train robbery loot into a pack and roped it onto the pack horse with a squaw hitch.

Without going near any of the dead men, the Outlaw Kid mounted and rode away into the night, leading the laden pack horse.

Sunrise would find the owners of the 2 Bar ranch back home. They would take care of the dead outlaws.

The Outlaw Kid leaned from his saddle, swung the pole gate closed, and slid the long wooden pin into place to hold it shut. Then he rode away without a backward glance.

The stars seemed lower and brighter that night than the Outlaw Kid had ever seen them. A round white moon rode the cloudless sky.

He had killed his first man. He had sided Long Red in his last gun-fight, and had shot to kill, because that was his only way to freedom. And then in the dark barn he had shot it out with Long Red and every time he pulled his gun trigger he'd thought: *I'm killing the only man on earth I fear and hate and despise. I'm killing my father.*

Then in the dark barn that was fouled with powdersmoke, and while his ear-drums still vibrated to the crashing echoes of guns, the halting, dying voice of Long Red had come to him in the blackness. Releasing him from every tie, every obligation, every hold that the vicious, thieving renegade had on him. Long Red had not sired him. Long Red had not been his father. He had killed a man who was bound to him by no blood tie.

Long Red had given him a name. Dawson. Matthews. Dawson Matthews? Or Matthews Dawson? It was confusing, the way Long Red had put it. It could be the name of one man. Or the names of two men. . . . But it was enough tonight to know that at last he had a real name.

Wyoming. . . . He had been taken from there when he was so young that he could not remember, because Long Red was the only father he had ever known and he had no shred of memory of a mother.

"Ask Bible Jones."

That was something to think about tonight as he rode out of Brown's Hole.

It had been several years since he had seen Bible Jones, back at Robbers' Roost. When the lanky, long haired, funereal faced Bible peddler and preacher had left him that little pocket Bible in his war-sack—the Bible Long Red had never seen, never knew he owned. The Bible he carried now, and which he did not pretend to understand because the words were strange and they were strung to-

gether so that it was hard for him to make much meaning out of them.

Ask Bible Jones. . . . The half locoed old wanderer must know, then, who he was, where he came from, why he had been raised by an outlaw who had no name but Long Red.

Long Red had hated and feared Bible Jones. But Bible Jones had been afraid of Long Red. He'd been so scared of the ugly-tempered, quick-triggered, treacherous outlaw that from the time at Robbers' Roost Bible Jones had always managed to keep away. Many a time during the past half dozen years Long Red and the Outlaw Kid would ride into some hideaway along the Outlaw Trail—the Hole-in-the-Wall, Brown's Park, Brown's Hole, the Robbers' Roost—and somebody would say that Bible Jones had just left.

And they might ride up on a fresh grave marked by a pile of rocks, or a wooden headboard. Chiseled in the rock or whittled into the wooden slab would be "Rest in Peace."

The Outlaw Kid would know that Bible Jones had done that last chore for some nameless outlaw who had died with his boots on.

"Ask Bible Jones!"

CHAPTER TWO

A Grave for the Outlaw Kid

THE sheriff at Rock Springs, Wyoming, was getting ready for bed when a rapping at the front door summoned him. A less fearless man would not have held a lighted lamp in his hand when he opened the door.

Most peace officers in as lawless a country as that cow town just north of Brown's Hole would have had a six-shooter instead of a lamp.

"Men have bin shot down thataway," said the Outlaw Kid quietly, "by night riders."

The sheriff of Rock Springs thumbed his suspenders up over his shoulders and grinned at the tall, lean jawed young outlaw, sizing him up quickly.

He saw a young cowboy who was dressed in clean shirt and overalls, his square, lean-jawed face freshly shaved. His nose was short and straight above a wide, square-cornered mouth that could grin easily or thin into a grim line. A pair of blue-gray eyes set under heavy black brows. Wiry black hair that needed trimming. He had wide shoulders and lean flanks, and his long legs were a little bowed.

"Come in," said the sheriff, "and git it off your chest. Shut the door behind you. And you better wipe your feet. The missus scrubbed the floors today. Had me prancin' around in my sock feet all evenin'."

In the sitting room the Outlaw Kid came to the point with a characteristic bluntness.

"I come to make a dicker with the Law. I'll swap you all the haul from the train robbery in Utah for a fair break to play it straight. I'm called the Outlaw Kid."

The sheriff whistled soundlessly and told the Outlaw Kid to set down and take the weight off his feet. To roll himself a smoke but not spill ary tobacco on the carpet.

"That's a big order, son. You've built up a hard rep. Long Red's kid is supposed to be a ornery, tough young customer. There's a fair sized bounty on your scalp."

The young outlaw's blue gray eyes hardened. His lips thinned, twisted a little bitterly. "Don't try to collect it," he said flatly. "I come here peaceful."

He had sat down on the edge of a chair. He was back on his feet now. The sheriff walked over to a box of cigars, selected one and bit off an end. He lit it and grinned faintly through the blue smoke.

"I'm not one of them bounty hunters, son. And you don't look like the ornery picture that's bin painted of you. But Long Red—"

"Long Red is dead. Before he died he told me he wasn't my father. I've never killed a law officer. I held the horses at a couple of hold-up jobs. I've rustled some cattle, stole horses, trailed with Long Red and renegades like him. I didn't come here to beg off. I rode here to Rock Springs to make a deal. I'll keep my end of it. Those registered mail sacks ain't bin opened. The Wells Fargo stuff is mostly there, I reckon. I've heard you was a square shooter. I figgered I had

somethin' to swap for a chance to quit the Outlaw Trail."

A red cheeked woman with graying curly hair came in, carrying a pair of carpet slippers.

She smiled warmly at the embarrassed young outlaw and told her husband to put on those slippers and quit trotting around in his sock feet. First thing he knew he'd be bothered again with those chilblains. Then for both of them to get out into the kitchen instead of sitting there spilling cigar ashes all over the carpet. That the young man looked like he could do with a warm meal.

"She'll feed you," the sheriff said in an undertone when she had bustled out, "in spite of hell. Better just shuck off your gun and leave it on the hall tree. She's kinda fussy about shootin' irons at the table."

It was against every bit of training, every instinct of a hunted man, to give up his six-shooter. The sheriff had taken a brass key from the mantel and was winding the big clock. He winked at the Outlaw Kid as he slipped a pint flask from inside the back of the clock. He pulled the cork cautiously.

"Don't gu'gle loud when you swaller," he whispered.

From the kitchen came the sound of stove lids being lifted, the scrape of a skillet, the woman's voice humming an old song.

The Outlaw Kid took a drink. The sheriff took one, then corked the flask, slid it inside the rear of the clock, closed the clock's back door and hitched up his suspenders. The Outlaw Kid took off his gun.

And it was not until the Outlaw Kid had eaten a meal of warmed-up roast beef, fried potatoes, vegetables and almost half an apple pie that he was allowed to talk about anything but cattle, the feed and water on the range, and wind up with a half way promise to attend a church sociable.

Then, out on the front porch in the dark, the sheriff of Rock Springs told the Outlaw Kid that it would take time, some politics and shenanigans and even then he could not promise too much. The railroads and banks had their own force of range detectives. Bounty hunters, the sheriff called them. Those manhunters were cold-blooded and relentless. Railroads and banks that had been robbed by Long Red's gang would not consider the human side of the deal.

"Like some general said about the only good Injuns bein' dead Injuns," Sheriff Hank Sanford explained. "Them big railroad outfits and the bankers figger that the only good outlaw is dead or locked up in the pen for life."

HE TOLD the Outlaw Kid that so far as he was concerned, the young cowpuncher was free to come and go at Rock Springs. That most of the law officers he knew would feel the same way about it. But so long as a range detective prowled the cow-country, there was the chance of his being captured or killed for the bounty on his hide.

He said he wasn't going to advise the Outlaw Kid to fetch in that money, give himself up publicly, and stand trial.

"Them smart Aleck lawyers will send you to the pen for life. I'd rather see you die out in the open than go through that living death inside a prison. I wish to God, son, that I could make this deal with you, man to man. You got a good pair of eyes. If there's a mean streak in you, I can't find it. And I'm a hard man to fool."

They sat there in the soft June night and smoked. As the grizzled sheriff talked, something of the bitter disappointment left the boy's heart.

Sheriff Hank Sanford told him that so far as he knew, the Law had only a general description of the Outlaw Kid. It was only by this badly warped and twisted version they got of his reputation that the Outlaw Kid was known.

"If you'd take yourself a clean name, drift to some new range, go to punchin' cows, livin' straight, there ain't much chance that you'll be tracked down by one of them bounty hunters."

The Outlaw Kid was close mouthed. He had said nothing about the names Long Red had mentioned—Dawson, Matthews. But he thought it would do no harm now to ask about those two names to which he could claim kin.

"Did you ever hear of an outfit named Dawson? Or Matthews?"

Sheriff Hank Sanford had been sitting with his armchair tilted on its back legs, his feet on the porch rail. His feet and the front legs of the chair hit the porch floor with a thump.

"Stay clear of them two feudin' outfits, son, or you'll wish you was back on the Outlaw Trail. They're bad medicine. That cattle war has moved outa Wyoming into Montana. And up there the wide Missouri River separates the two outfits. But till they're shot down to the last man the Dawsons and the Matthews will still ride in pairs.

"When I said hunt a new range, son, I didn't mean for you to hire out as a tough hand to either of them gun-packin' spreads. Stay wide of the Dawson and Matthews ranges."

"I'd heard Long Red mention 'em," said the Outlaw Kid.

might help us to figger out somethin' that'll do you some good."

The Outlaw Kid wasn't much of a hand to talk. Long Red had beaten and quirted lessons like that into the boy's hide. But he told the story of the gun-fight at the 2 Bar ranch in Brown's Hole. Told it simply.

"After I killed Long Red," he finished, "I rode away with the train robbery haul they'd fought over."

He motioned toward his saddle horse and laden pack horse tied to the hitchrack in front of the sheriff's house.

"The stuff is out there on the pack horse. You kin have it."

Sheriff Hank Sanford pulled in his breath and covered his shock with a cough. He took another nip at the bottle.

"You might as well keep the horse and pack saddle." The Outlaw Kid got to his feet. "I'd better be driftin'."

"Set down. Set down till I git this

Small wonder that each month DIME WESTERN is winning a new army of enthusiastic readers! Be sure to buy the big May issue, featuring three sure-fire long stories of the gunsmoke frontier: "Tornado from Texas," by Harry F. Olmsted, "Wet Cattle—Hot Guns!" by Walt Coburn, and "Those Fighting Gringo Devils!" by T. T. Flynn. Reserve your copy today —read it April 1st!

"Long Red," said Sheriff Hank Sanford ,"was a hired killer for one or the other, I forget which, when they both ran cattle along Powder River. Then he begun killin' and collectin' bounty money from both outfits. They ketched onto him and he got outa the country before they could ketch and hang him."

The sheriff found a bottle he had cached under the porch and took a drink. He said he needed a gargle of likker to take the taste of the Dawson and Matthews names out of his mouth.

"You say Long Red is dead?" he asked when the Outlaw Kid said he didn't think he needed a drink. That he didn't care much for the stuff.

"Yes, sir. Long Red is dead. So are Slim Green and Heavy Carter and Seth Barker. Blucher Barker was hit but he got away."

"You don't need to tell me about the ruckus if you don't feel like it. But it straight. Anybody see you ride away from the 2 Bar ranch?"

"No, sir."

"Meet anybody between there and here?"

"Nobody. I lone camped; hid out durin' the day an' rode by starlight. You're the only man I've seen. Only man I've talked to."

"Then nobody," said Sheriff Hank Sanford, "knows that the Outlaw Kid is still alive. . . . There's a chance, a gamblin' chance, son, that we kin wipe the name of the Outlaw Kid off the law books as dead."

The sheriff of Rock Springs lit another cigar. That cigar was smoked and chewed down to a soggy half inch cold butt by the time he had finished talking.

Then the sheriff and the Outlaw Kid shook hands. While the sheriff led the pack horse with its valuable burden around to his barn, the Outlaw Kid rode

away in the dark hour that blackens just before dawn.

HE RODE away on his lonely trail, headed northward. He was Montana bound. His future was still dangerous, still clouded. Perhaps he would never be a free man. There would always be that shadow of fear trailing him. Fear that he would meet somebody like Blucher Barker who would recognize him as the Outlaw Kid. And he would have to take to the Outlaw Trail to get away from the bounty-hunters.

If the rustling of the leaves along that dangerous Outlaw Trail spread the news that the Outlaw Kid had made a deal with the Law to go straight, then that last refuge of a hunted man would be closed to him. He would no longer be welcome at such places as the Hole in the Wall, Robbers' Roost, Brown's Hole. Those outlaws would kill him for a traitor.

That deal he had made with the sheriff at Rock Springs, Wyoming, had netted him but little. A fighting chance to go straight, a slim, thousand-to-one fighting chance to live the life of a free cowhand. But he was taking it.

His pockets were empty. He was broke. He would have to ride the grub line all the way to Montana. And he was starting that ride on a stolen horse.

But the Outlaw Kid had youth and courage. He knew how to get along. He could take his own part in almost any kind of a tight. And he had the friendship, the backing of that sheriff back yonder who was going to do his damndest, he'd said, to blot out forever the back trail of the Outlaw Kid.

"Give yourself a name," he had told the Outlaw Kid. "Ride on to a new range. The Outlaw Kid is dead."

That was just what the Outlaw Kid was doing. And for a while he felt a little guilty about the plan he had kept a secret from the Sheriff of Rock Springs.

"Dawson Matthews," he repeated aloud, over and over. "Dawson Matthews."

Now he was headed for the Missouri River that separated the Dawson Lazy D range from the Matthews Flying W. He was riding, he knew, into danger, and into trouble. But he grinned at the prospect. He belonged somehow to one or both of those two warring cow outfits.

If only he could locate Bible Jones. Bible Jones was the only man belonging to his outlaw past, that he wanted to see and talk to.

That whiskey-drinking, dour-faced old preacher could tell him who he was, where he came from, why he had been raised to an outlaw life by Long Red.

That digging up of his identity and the reason for his being reared in outlaw hideouts was more important than anything else right now. And so the Outlaw Kid was dead. And Dawson Matthews rode with his head in the stars.

CHAPTER THREE

Signed On For a Feud Hand

NAILED to the trunk of a giant cottonwood on the south side of the Missouri River at the old round-up crossing above the Narrows was a bullet riddled sign. Its weather scabbed black lettering read: "Matthews Range Where Strangers Ain't Wanted. Stay Off!" The Flying W brand was burned on the wooden board .

Dawson Matthews, alias the Outlaw Kid, read the sign. Then he forded the river. There was a strip of swimming water and then his horse splashed ashore on a sandy bar.

He stepped off to let his horse get its wind and to pour water out of his boots. Nailed to a lightning blazed old cottonwood was a weatherstained board with faded red lettering that read: "Dawson Lazy D Boundary. Stay On Your Own Side Of The River."

Like the Matthews sign on the south side of the river, the Dawson sign on the north bank was pocked with bullet holes.

There was a fringe of willow brush and wild roses back of the strip of sandbar. The Outlaw Kid's back was to it as he sat on the sand lifting one leg, then the other, to drain the water from his boots.

Some sixth sense, some instinct, told him not to look around or make a gun move when he heard the brush crack.

The four men who rode out of the brush had guns in their hands and packed car-

bines in their saddle scabbards. They needed shaves. One of them was scowling. The other three grinned, but their grins were unpleasant and their eyes were hard. They circled him and pulled up, lazing in their saddles, their six-shooters hanging with deceptive looseness in their hands. They rode horses wearing the Lazy D brand.

The scowling man was gray whiskered and blocky, as he sat his saddle, leaning a little forward across his saddle horn. His mouth was a hard, grim line and his eyes were the light gray of new steel. He kept staring hard at the Outlaw Kid while the other three, younger, sloppier in the saddle, talked, carrying on a bantering, taunting, hoorawing conversation.

"It ain't a mushrat fellers. A mushrat has a tail."

"Mebby it's a bobtailed mushrat."

"It could be sittin' on its tail."

"A man could rope it and drag it around a while."

"Put it in the Lazy D iron. It won't take but a minute to heat a runnin' iron. Gather us some willer sticks and build us a little fire and heat a runnin' iron."

"Might just whack off its ears—sleeper mark the thing. I don't know if the Old Man'd want a thing like that wearin' the Lazy D brand. He's almighty proud."

"We could ask him."

"I wouldn't bother him. He gits riled up when he's bothered. You kin see he's lookin' it over. Studyin' it, kinda."

"Mebbyso he'll just gut shoot it."

"You know the Old Man don't waste ca'tridges thataway. He's proud an' haughty. Won't shoot at nothin' but a gen-u-ine Matthews."

"You're to the windward, Wid. Sniff hard. You kin tell a Matthews by its stink."

"Even the Matthews shirt-tail kinfolks has got that same stink. Mind that cousin we hung, Rip?"

"We had hell a-gittin' our horses close enough to rope that cousin. Jode's throwed him."

They looked alike, the three younger cowpunchers. Though one was rawboned and rode a long stirrup, another was short and thickset, the third of medium build. They had the same pale gray eyes and they grinned alike. All had straw colored hair and a week's growth of sandy whiskers.

The gray whiskered man shoved his wooden handled six-shooter back into its holster. Then he spat a stream of tobacco juice at the yellow sand. It barely missed the Outlaw Kid's boot.

The Outlaw Kid sat on the sand with his legs crossed. He was sopping wet from the belt down. But his shirt was fairly dry and he fished a sack of tobacco and book of papers from the shirt pocket. He paid no attention to the three younger cowpunchers. But from under the slanted brim of his hat he watched the Old Man. He blew a brown cigarette paper free, spilled tobacco in it, rolled the cigarette into shape and stuck it in a corner of his mouth. He put the sack of tobacco and book of papers back in his shirt pocket. Took off his hat and got a dry match from its sweatband. He lit the cigarette and flipped out the match flame. Then he got slowly to his feet.

Standing with his legs spread a little, his thumbs hooked in his sagging cartridge belt, he grinned at the white whiskered cowman. But his blue gray eyes were hard.

"If them three clowns of yourn are tryin' to throw a scare into me," he said quietly, "tell 'em they're wastin' their time."

"No Lazy D man," said the white whiskered cowman, his jaws moving like a steel trap, "wastes time between sleeps."

The Outlaw Kid's grin widened a little. "I kin believe that."

THE three younger cowpunchers were silent now, grinning faintly, their guns glinting in the morning sunlight. The long-geared one had crooked his forefinger in the trigger guard of his six-shooter and was spinning it carelessly. They were waiting for orders.

The Old Man spat again. The sand between the Outlaw Kid's feet stained brown.

"What's your name, stranger?" he asked sharply.

The Outlaw Kid had been waiting for that question. His eyes watched the grizzled cowman's face as he gave his studied reply.

"Dawson Matthews."

One of the three younger cowpunchers grunted like somebody had kicked him in the belly.

The lanky one nearly dropped the six-shooter he was spinning.

The third let out an angry, derisive snort. "The gally buzzard! String him up!"

"Either you're a rank stranger or a damned fool," he said, "There's Dawsons. And there's Matthews. But there ain't no such thing on the face of this earth as a Dawson Matthews."

Old Man Dawson's voice was harsh. Under its stubble of white whiskers and weather stain, his face seemed for a moment to have taken on a grayish pallor. His hand, blunt fingered and gnarled, had dropped to the wooden handle of his long barreled six-shooter.

"If I thought," he spoke in that same strained harsh voice, "that such a human thing roamed the face of this earth, I'd kill it like I'd kill a hydrophobia skunk. Do you believe that, young feller?"

The Outlaw Kid had met all kinds of men, and among them tougher men, he knew, than this old white-whiskered cowman. But never had he looked into the eyes of a more dangerous one. Nor would he ever come closer than he was right now to looking square into the eyes of Death.

"I kin believe that, sir."

The Outlaw Kid wasn't flinching under that pale gray stare. Nor was there fear in his quiet voice. But the pit of his stomach was empty and cold as ice.

"Ride back acrost that Missouri River," Old Man Dawson broke a taut silence. "Go to the Flyin' W ranch. When Dad Matthews asks you what your name is, tell him what you just told me. . . . Git goin'!"

The Outlaw Kid walked over to his horse. He mounted and rode across the strip of sandbar and into the shallow water, without once looking back. On into the deeper water that wet his stirrups and then the swimming water that washed against his saddle skirts. And still he did not look back across his shoulder at the stern-faced old cowman.

He had seen Old Man Dawson slide his saddle gun from its scabbard. And he knew, just as certain as he knew that he was still alive by a thin chance, that if he turned his head he would get a .30-30 bullet between his eyes.

His horse splashed ashore on the south bank of the Missouri River and he rode on through the willows on the far side and out of sight of the men on the Dawson bank. And it was not until he was well screened by the brush and cottonwoods that he let his blowing horse stop.

One of the vertebra between his shoulder blades and just below the base of his neck felt like it was being pressed by a sharp hot iron. He felt sort of weak and the inside of his belly was tied in a hard cold knot. He hooked a leg across the saddle horn and the water trickled from his boot toop. Then he tried to roll a cigarette. But his hands were a little wet and his fingers were unsteady. He spilled tobacco down the front of his damp shirt and ruined three of the wheatstraw cigarette papers.

From behind a red willow thicket sounded a man's deep chuckle. Then the thick brush shook and crashed and the man plowed his way into sight. A giant of a man with graying black hair and beard, rough hewn features and puckered greenish gray eyes.

He had a carbine in the crook of his arm. He was still chuckling but his gray-green eyes were sharp and suspicious and dangerous.

"Old Man Dawson," his deep chested voice rolled softly from bearded lips, "and them three Dawson cousins musta told it to you shore scarey. Damned if you ain't green around the gills!"

The Outlaw Kid's face flushed. He was ashamed, and hot with anger. Then he managed to summon up a sickly sort of grin.

"It would be a hell of a note right now," he said, steadying his voice, "if you turned out to be Dad Matthews." The grin was still on his sun-tanned face.

"That's me, young feller. Who are you?"

The Outlaw Kid unhooked his leg and kicked his foot into the stirrup.

"I'm Dawson Matthews," he said flatly. "Finish your laugh."

There was a six-shooter in his hand and it was pointed directly at the big man's belly.

THE big iron-gray bearded man's voice rumbled like far away thunder. His green-gray eyes, deep set under shaggy iron gray brows, studied the Outlaw Kid.

"Did Old Man Dawson ask you your name? And you said your name was Dawson Matthews?"

The Outlaw Kid nodded. The big cowman was paying his six-shooter no attention whatever. He felt a little foolish.

Dad Matthews tilted his shaggy head back and laughed. The force of that sound was like the bellowing of a bull. That deep chested laughter would be carrying across the stretch of river on a still morning like this. Carrying back across to Old Man Dawson.

Then Dad Matthews, still ignoring the gun in the Outlaw Kid's hand, plowed back through the brush. A few moments later the big cowman was spurring a big black gelding along a trail to the river's edge. His big voice roared its mighty challenge.

"Your loss is my gain, you bushwhackin' old he-wolf! I'm claimin' that young feller that says his name is Dawson Matthews! Claimin' him, by the almighty! He's got more guts than all the no-good, bushwhackin', cattle-rustlin', horse-thief shirt-tail kin that ever was whelped in your coyote strain. I whupped you outa Wyoming and I'll clean Montana of your coyote breed!"

Dad Matthews was chuckling and cussing when he rode back to where the Outlaw Kid sat his horse. He slid his gun back into its holster.

The big cowman rode up and reined his big black gelding to a halt. His chuckling died into silence. The mirth went out of his eyes, leaving them as green as deep winter ice.

The Outlaw Kid was wishing he still held his gun. The big man's voice was a heavy ominous rumble now, like thunder that matched the green lightning flash of his eyes.

"No Matthews ever mated with a Dawson," he said. "There could be no such breed as a Dawson-Matthews. If there was, I'd tromp it out. If I didn't, Old Man Dawson would. And that would be the

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only thing on Gawdamighty's earth that we ever shook hands on. You understand that, young feller?"

"I've had it made plain to me," said the Outlaw Kid. "Twice."

"I made that talk to Old Man Dawson just now, just to rile him.... Now where in the Devil's name did you ever git the notion to call yourself Dawson Matthews, then ride square into both him and me?"

The Outlaw Kid told himself that it was about time he did more level headed thinking and less boneheaded talking. He was saying nothing from now on about any part of his past.

"It was just one of them ideas," he grinned widely, "that a man gits. Now it seems right silly."

"No growed man would fool around with such a notion. And you don't look plumb foolish. What's your game, anyhow?"

"I needed a new name." said the Outlaw Kid truthfully enough, "I took the name of Dawson Matthews. Then rode here with it to see what would happen."

"You didn't waste time findin' out. Mebbyso you just like a josh. But most mebby you got an ace in the hole deep buried. I don't reckon it would do much good to ask you who you are or where you come from or why you horned into this. You got the earmarks of a man on the dodge. You're travelin' light on a horse with a blotched brand.

"The Outlaw Trail crosses through here. Renegades on the dodge hole-up in the badlands and take in the dances at Landusky. But they let my stock alone and they don't bother Dawson. So I don't reckon you're aimin' to try out anything. I'm short-handed as hell for your kind of a cowhand. I'll pay you what you're worth. Want it?"

The Outlaw Kid nodded. "I'm your huckleberry, mister."

"Then let's ride on to the ranch. I've bin here all night waitin' for Old Man Dawson and his three tough hands to cross. I kin do with some sleep and a bait of grub.... Come on, Dawson Matthews."

As they headed for the Flying W ranch the big cowman said that as long as he had taken that hell of a name he might as well keep on using it. Because it would worry and puzzle Old Man Dawson.

He said that time had been when there was a hell slue of Dawson and Matthews but a lot of them had been killed off. Old Man Dawson had those three cousins. But there was only one other Matthews man besides himself, and that was his son Rale who was his wagon boss and ramrod.

Rale Matthews wasn't blood kin, at that. He had been adopted. Rale was a good cowman and he had plenty of guts in a tight but there were times when Rale might be hell-raising at Landusky or off winning bronc riding and roping money at some Fourth of July contest. Rale had a wild streak.

"Never seen a preacher's son yet that didn't turn out wild."

"His father was a preacher?"

"Still is, so far as I know. Goes under the name of Bible Jones."

CHAPTER FOUR

Outlaw Reunion

THE Flying W ranch buildings and corrals were about five miles back in the badlands at Coyote Springs. They were mostly log buildings with sod ing chute, all set in a sort of park of box elder and giant cottonwood trees. The broken ridges of the badlands that pocketed the ranch were dotted with scrub pines.

Several cowpunchers were perched on the top of a round pole corral and sitting up there with them was a girl dressed in beaded buckskin blouse and shabby leather riding skirt and boots. Her blue-black hair was parted in the middle and hung in two heavy braids, squaw fashion, below her waist. She held a man's Stetson hat in her gloved hands.

From inside the round corral came the sounds of a bronc squealing and grunting as it pitched. And a cloud of yellow dust rose sluggishly, powdering the watchers.

"That," said Dad Matthews, "will be Rale, showin' off. Just back from Miles City and part drunk like as not, puttin' on a show to prove how he come away with the prize money.... And them cowhands I pay fightin' wages a-settin' on that corral like so many big birds when they should be workin'. That's Rale's idee of ramroddin' a cow outfit."

The big cowman's voice was a soft rumble but there was annoyance and anger in the green glint of his eyes.

"Ride up alongside the gate," he told the Outlaw Kid, "while them corral birds is all too busy watchin' the show to take notice. Pull the gate pin and swing 'er wide open. And mebbyso we'll see somethin' worth watchin'."

Dad Matthews chuckled softly but his eyes didn't soften. The Outlaw Kid knew what would happen when he opened the gate. He was watching the girl as he pulled the gate pin and swung the big pole gate wide open. She and the row of cowpunchers had not seen him or Dad Matthews. They did not notice the big gate swing open.

But the big, line-backed buckskin bronc sulled for a moment, walled his eyes as the gate swung wide. Then, with a bawling squeal the sweat-streaked, spur-marked bronc sank its head and pitched straight for the open gateway. Pitching high and crooked. Sunfishing, landing on slanted legs, grunting, snorting, hogging it every time the flinty hoofs hit the ground.

Out of the small round corral where a bronc did not have a chance to really open up its book of tricks. Out into the open. Pitching out across the flat open park. And every time the big black maned, black tailed line-backed buckskin gelding hit the ground the rider was loosened more. The hat he had been using to fan the bronc sailed through the air. The long legs that had been raking spur rowels from shoulder to flank, leaving bloody tracks in the yellow hide, no longer swung. One foot had jarred out of its stirrup.

The rider grabbed for the saddle horn and missed. The big buckskin bronc pitched at a slanting angle to the left. The rider shot out of the saddle like a bolt shot from a sling, his leather chaps flapping like broken wings.

The bronc rider landed on his shoulder and back. He lay there, dust powdering the face that was drained of blood and yellowish, eyes rolling, gasping for the breath that had been knocked out of him by the fall.

The big buckskin bronc bucked on down into the box elder trees, stirrups flapping. The trailing hackamore rope caught in the trees and yanked the bronc to a snorting, blowing, sweating halt.

Dad Matthews sat his big black gelding and roared with laughter. The cowpunchers were climbing down from the top pole of the corral and with uneasy grins were trying to get out of sight before the big bearded cowman finished laughing.

Only the girl still perched on the corral and she was staring hard at the Outlaw Kid. He flushed uneasily under the unsmiling scrutiny of her green eyes.

The bronc rider got to his feet and walked over to where his new high crowned Stetson lay crumpled on the ground. One of the bucking buckskin's hoofs had crushed the hat. He used it now to slap the dirt from his red flannel shirt.

The color was coming back into Rale Matthews' face and he stood there, six feet three inches tall, his face skinned a little, dirt in his newly trimmed curly, rope colored hair. His eyes were a pale yellowish brown; bloodshot and dangerous. The grin on his long, lean jawed face had an ugly twist. He glared at Dad Matthews who was chuckling, then he walked over to where the Outlaw Kid sat his horse.

Unbuckling his chaps with each step, throwing the chaps to one side, he made a handsome picture of what a cowboy in town should look like. His California wool pants, brown colored with a faint large check in the pattern and the seat and inner legs foxed with white buckskin, shoved in the tops of fancy stitched boots.

"I don't know who you are," he said hotly, "or where you come from, but I saw you open that gate. Step down, mister. I'm goin' to skin the damned hide off you."

Rale Matthews, adopted son of Dad Matthews, did not look much like his father, Bible Jones, except for the long lean jaw and the pale yellow eyes. And his tall, rawboned frame. There the resemblance ended. Rale Matthews had none of his real father's funereal look.

The Outlaw Kid felt trapped. The bearded cowman had ribbed this fight to teach the fancy bronc rider a lesson and to test the fighting prowess of the

young stranger who had dared call himself Dawson Matthews. Such tests were typical of the cow-country where there is no room for a quitter.

The Outlaw Kid savvied that. But he felt at a bad disadvantage. He had been crowded into a false position. There was contempt in the green eyes of the girl who still perched on top of the corral. Her red mouth was smiling faintly. It was the girl who was making the Outlaw Kid feel like a damn' fool. There was no guesswork about who she was. Her green eyes and that faint smile marked her for Dad Matthews' daughter.

THE Outlaw Kid swung his right leg over his saddle horn and landed on both feet. His wet boots made a squashy sound. Then Rale Matthews came at him with both fists swinging. The Outlaw Kid's arms raised to guard his face. Rale's right fist crashed into his nose. Blood spurted and blinding pain shot up into the Kid's eyes. He pulled the taller man into a clinch and they stood there for a short half minute, straining, wrestling, locked together. Then Rale's long leg tripped the Kid and they went down with a crash, Rale Matthews on top.

The Outlaw Kid was no scientific fighter but since he could remember he had had to fight. Rough and tumble fighting, no holds barred. Fists and boots and teeth. And the toughest man won.

Rale Matthews was a product of that same school of scrapping. He was taller, longer in reach, but not as compactly built or well muscled as the young outlaw. His few years in age might have given him more experience. Otherwise they were fairly evenly matched.

It was not a clean fight. There was nothing about it to excite any admiration for fighting skill. They wrestled and clubbed at one another with bruised fists. Rolled over and over on the ground in a smear of dirt and blood. Kicked apart from each other and scrambled to their feet, they stood toe to toe and slugged. Until one or the other was knocked off balance and then they would tangle in another clinch. Down again with a crash.

But neither man was gouging at the other's eyes. Neither man used his teeth. Both were badly winded. Both had smashed noses and puffed, bruised mouths. Their shirts were ripped and Rale Matthews' fancy California pants were a ruin of dirt and blood. The force of their sledge-hammer blows was weakening. Both men were getting winded and tired. Their eyes were half blinded by blood and dirt and sweat. Neither of them had spoken a word.

They backed out of a clinch, gasping for breath. Pausing for part of a minute to rub the muck out of their eyes and get their breath.

The Outlaw Kid glanced up and saw the girl sitting there on top of the corral, her green eyes shining, red lips parted, gloved fists crushing her fawn colored new Stetson.

A surge of white hot anger swept over the Outlaw Kid. He forgot that he was winded, played out, battered. His teeth bared in a snarling grin and he tore into Rale Matthews with a blind fury that sent the bronc rider backwards, his long arms raised in a futile effort to block the Kid's persistent rain of sledge-hammer blows.

The Outlaw Kid beat down the other man's guard, gave him a chance to get balanced on his long legs, then pounded blow after blow into Rale's face. While the other's long arms flailed weakly, until Rale's face was a battered, bloody mask.

Rale Matthews' long legs gave way at the knee joints and the Outlaw Kid's fists knocked him down. Rale Matthews was knocked out cold. The Kid straddled the motionless, stretched out form.

"Pull Dawson Matthews off Rale," rumbled Dad Matthews, "before he kills 'im."

The cowpunchers pulled the Outlaw Kid to his feet. The Kid stood there on widespread legs, his breath coming in heavy sobs. His eyes were slits in a mask of dirt and sweat and blood. Then he looked up at the girl on the corral and his white teeth bared in a grisly, mirthless grin.

"And I kin ride the bronc that throwed him!" The Outlaw Kid gritted.

"Can you?" Her voice was toneless.

The color was gone from her tanned face, leaving it ivory white.

She jumped down from the corral and headed for the house, stumbling a little as she went. She closed the door behind her.

The Flying W cowpunchers half carried, half led the two battered fighters to the creek bank.

Dad Matthews sat his horse for a long moment, staring after them. His bearded lips were flattened to show his big white teeth. His green eyes were as hard and cold as deep river ice. Then he rode on to the barn alone.

When he had put up his big black gelding and the barn man had cared for the Outlaw Kid's horse, Dad Matthews walked slowly over to the creek bank where the cowpunchers were ringed around the two battered fighters. Rale Matthews and the Outlaw Kid were stripped to the waist and were sluicing their heads and faces in the cold spring water that formed the creek.

"That was a good clean fight," rumbled the bearded cowman. "No cussin'. Now I'm tellin' you two roosters to shake hands. Rale, this young feller is Dawson Matthews."

Rale Matthews grinned wolfishly. "There ain't no such damned animal as a Dawson Matthews. If there is, it should be killed off."

He pushed his way through the circle of cowpunchers and headed for the bunkhouse with long legged strides.

The Outlaw Kid picked up his cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter and buckled the belt on. He eyed the bloody rags that had been his faded blue flannel shirt and undershirt and his battered lips broke into a grin.

"Any you boys got a shirt I could buy or borrow? I'd rather have a shirt on."

"Mine's clean this mornin'," said a cowpuncher. He unbuttoned his shirt, peeled it off and handed it to the Outlaw Kid who put it on.

"I'll buy you another if my luck don't play out," he told the cowpuncher who stood there in a red flannel undershirt.

"What in hell goes on here?" growled Dad Matthews.

"Rale," said the cowpuncher who had sacrificed his shirt, "went to the bunkhouse to git his gun."

Dad Matthews turned and strode away. They saw him go into the bunkhouse and slam the door behind him. And they could hear the low rumble of his deep-chested growl.

"Rale Matthews," said the cowpuncher in the red flannel undershirt, "makes a shore purty showin' when he wins. But he loses hard."

"With Lea Matthews a-lookin' on. Seein' him throwed, then whupped. Hell-amighty! I bet a hat she quits 'im. She don't like a loser."

"Yep. All you got to do now, mister," grinned the cowboy in the red flannel undershirt, "is to make a ride on that Yaller Hornet bronc. The boys call me Windy fer some reason. What was it Dad was tryin' to tell Rale was your name?"

"Dawson Matthews," said the Outlaw Kid, tucking the tail of the borrowed shirt into the waistband of his blood-stained overalls.

They stared hard at him. His blue gray eyes, puffed to slits, stared back at them. He spat out some blool and grinned.

"You might git used to it," he told them. And headed for the bunkhouse.

As he walked his right hand brushed against the butt of his six-shooter. If Rale Matthews was bound to finish it with guns, he'd better try his luck and get it over with.

But when Dad Matthews came out of the bunkhouse, he closed the door with a quiet finality.

"Me'n you," he said quietly, "better git ourselves a bait of grub. Rale ain't gunnin' for nobody. He was workin' on a quart of Miles City forty-rod when I left 'im."

THEY went into the long, low-roofed log cabin where the cowpunchers ate. There was a long plank table and benches. A moon-faced Chinaman padded around on felt soled slippers and put platters of meat and potatoes and hot biscuits on the table.

The Outlaw Kid had not eaten a square meal for several days. He had been hun-

gry when sunrise found him at the river bank a little after sunrise. But he was not hungry now. The excitement and the beating he had taken had blotted out his hunger. But he wolfed his food because he needed it. Washing it down with strong black coffee.

Dad Matthews was a giant with a tremendous appetite. He was still eating when the Outlaw Kid finished the cigarette he rolled from the makin's he found in the pocket of the borrowed shirt.

Finally the big man finished eating. He wiped his drooping iron gray moustache and beard with a big white silk handkerchief.

"You kin git what clothes you need at the cabin we call the store. You'll find some bedrolls there. Look 'em over and take the best of the blankets and a good tarp. Move over to the bunkhouse. Rale has a horn drooped and he'll sull for a few days. But you taken the paw and beller outa him. And I give him his orders. I'm givin' you yourn, Dawson. I want no gun-play between you two. I need you both. Got that straight? I want for you two to git along."

"Yes, sir."

"And here. This fell outa your saddle pockets."

Dad Matthews laid a small buckskin covered pocket Bible on the table. His green eyes watched the Outlaw Kid pick it up and put it in his pocket. The Outlaw kid made no explanation. The bearded cowman asked no question. It was a strange sort of silence that gripped them.

Then the big cowman swung his legs over the bench and got to his feet. They went outside together into the sunlight.

"Yonder," pointed Dad Matthews, "is the store. The door's open so I reckon Lea is over there. Lea is my daughter. Her and an Assiniboine squaw is the only wimmin on the ranch. When you git fixed up at the store, you better grab yourself some sleep. We're crossin' the River tonight before moonrise."

The big bearded cowman left the Outlaw Kid standing there and went on to the main house, a large log cabin with a front porch.

The Outlaw Kid walked slowly over to the store. He half dreaded, half hoped for this meeting with the girl who had sat on the corral and watched two men batter one another to bloody pulps. He wanted to see what she was like beneath that cold mask. He was curious to know if any sort of warmth could melt the chill of her ice green eyes. But his heart was pumping the blood into his throat and his legs felt weak-kneed and he did not know what to do with his hands. He knew that his face was a battered mess and that he needed a haircut and that he must look like some kind of a walking scarecrow. His feet dragged and his spurs jingled too loudly. He had to force himself to walk through the open doorway.

Then he wanted to laugh out loud. It was a fat squaw in a gingham dress who stood, wooden-faced and black-eyed behind the counter. She stared at him as only a squaw can look at you.

"I want to git some clean clothes," he said, "and a bed."

The fat, round-faced squaw grunted and did not move.

The Outlaw Kid started making sign talk. Not the Indian sign talk but awkward gestures. He raised his voice, as a person is apt to do when trying to talk to somebody who does not understand your language.

"Shirt. See? Undershirt. Undershirt. Socks. Feet, savvy? Moccasin? Feet? Socks? Overalls. Like these. See? Overalls. Underdrawers—" His voice lifted to a shout.

Then he halted. His face reddening. From behind some boxes and sacks came the sound of a girl's laughter. Unchecked, full throated, hearty laughter. Even as the bearded giant cowman gave vent to his mirth, so did Lea Matthews laugh.

The fat, moon-faced squaw stood behind the counter. Her beady black eyes were fixed on the battered face of the young cowpuncher outlaw. Then the Outlaw Kid was grinning. And the hot blaze of anger and humiliation went out of his gray blue eyes.

Lea Matthews came out from behind the boxes. She wore a green checkered dress that matched the color of her eyes and her heavy black braids were coiled in a knot at the back of her neck. There was color in her cheeks and she looked like some young schoolgirl playing a joke. There was laughter in her eyes.

She spoke to the fat squaw in the Indian language, her slim, tanned hands moving rapidly in the Indian sign talk. And then the fat squaw was laughing so that her fat paunch shook and she waddled out from behind the counter and outside on moccasined feet.

"Starting from the hat down," she said, her voice soft, "you want the works. I'll bet you the best hat in the store against the thing you're wearing that you can't ride the Yellow Hornet. And what's the name that goes down in the time book?"

"I'll call the hat bet," said the Outlaw Kid, grinning across the counter at her. "And you kin charge what I buy to my name. It's Dawson Matthews."

The Outlaw Kid had expected that name to get some sort of a rise out of her. But he was unprepared for what happened.

The little laugh lights went out of her green eyes and the color drained from her face. She stared at him as if she were looking at some horrible ghost.

"No!" Lea Matthews whispered. "No! You—it's a lie! It *has* to be a lie! It *must* be a lie!"

Then she was leaning across the counter staring at him, those strange green eyes of hers searching his, studying his face, every feature of that face that was too battered now to resemble anyone or anything.

"There can't be any such person," she said, the color slowly returning to her tanned cheeks, "as Dawson Matthews. Why do you come here with such a lie? Don't you know that my father would kill you? That Old Man Dawson would hang you? Where did you get such a name? Who told you to call yourself Dawson Matthews?"

Her voice was a harsh, unsteady whisper. The grin had faded from the Outlaw Kid's battered face. He lowered his voice and his eyes searched the green eyes of Lea Matthews for the truth.

"Then," he said slowly, measuring each word, "there is such a person as Dawson Matthews?"

"I—We can't talk here. If anybody heard us you'd never get out of this cabin alive. And it would mean the end of everything. I mean I can't tell you. But I have to talk to you. Tonight. Meet me after dark. I'll be at the squaw's cabin above the spring house."

LEA MATTHEWS forced the smile back on her lips but her eyes were sick with some sort of dread. She looked at him, then past him, and the Outlaw Kid turned around quickly.

The cowpuncher in the red flannel undershirt who called himself Windy was standing in the doorway, a lopsided grin on his face. But the young outlaw who called himself Dawson Matthews thought he read something behind that grin that was almost cunning. And Windy's sky blue eyes were missing nothing.

The Outlaw Kid wondered how long the cowpuncher had been standing there, or standing just outside the doorway and out of sight. And he wondered how much the man's ears had picked up. Windy wore no spurs with a warning jingle.

Windy's crooked grin and the humor in his puckered blue eyes seemed genuine enough.

"Thought I had another shirt in my warsack. But one of the boys musta beat me to it. It'll be a size fifteen, ma'am. One of them with the stripes runnin' long-wise in that strawberry roan color."

"And mark it down against me," said the Outlaw Kid. "I'm wearin' Windy's last shirt. He's what you'd actually call the kind of a man who would give you the shirt off his back."

It seemed to the Outlaw Kid that they all three laughed too quickly at the lame joke.

Windy loitered around while the Outlaw Kid got his new clothes and a bedroll. He hardly stopped talking. Shoving the new clothes that Lea handed across the counter into a new canvas warsack. Then as the Outlaw Kid swung his roped bedroll onto his shoulder, Windy started for the bunkhouse.

"You forgot to pick out that hat," Lea called the Outlaw Kid back. And when Windy went on, she leaned across the counter.

"Do you suppose he heard anything?" she whispered.

"*Quien sabe?* Hard to tell."

"I don't trust that man. He talks too much and says nothing. And he don't miss a thing. He's a new hand. Dad hired him at Landusky."

Landusky was the tough little mining camp and cow town that marked the north end of the Outlaw Trail in the Little Rockies.

The Outlaw Kid found a hat his size and creased it, cramming it on his head to shape it. He reached across the counter and took the girl's hand. It was cold and a little unsteady.

"I'll meet you at the squaw's cabin. Right after dark."

"There'll be no light inside the cabin. Open the door and come in. If you see a light inside, stay away. . . . And watch that man Windy. I don't trust him."

"But you're trustin' me?" He tightened his grip on her hand. Felt an answering pressure.

"I have to trust you. I want to find out. . . . And don't let Dad Matthews' laugh fool you. I've seen him laugh like that while he was filling a man's belly full of bullets. Walk easy, Dawson Matthews. . . . Now get goin'. Here comes Rale."

The Outlaw Kid, his new hat slanted on his head, went out the door with his bedroll on his shoulder. Rale Matthews had to step to one side to let him through the doorway. He heard Lea Matthews call some bantering greeting, and then Rale's tipsy reply.

As he reached the bunkhouse a man blocked the doorway. He stood there, a small, wiry, leathery man with swarthy skin and a pair of opaque black eyes set on either side of a hawk-beaked nose. The man was Blucher Barker.

The outlaw's bony clawlike hand was on his gun. He shook his head and his black eyes flashed the Outlaw Kid a swift warning. His thin lips hardly moved. His words were barely audible.

"Take 'er easy, Kid. There's a bounty-hunter in camp. Me'n you is rank strangers."

The Outlaw Kid's hand came away from his gun. Blucher Barker hitched up his slanted cartridge belt and walked past the Outlaw Kid without more than a sharp, warning flick of his opaque black eyes.

From inside the bunkhouse came the sound of Windy's too-loud voice telling some yarn, and the amused laughter of his cowpuncher audience. Windy's puckered blue eyes watched the Outlaw Kid come through the doorway.

"I cleaned off the bunk next to mine," said Windy. "Spread them dead men's soogans on it. There's them that claims a dead man's blankets is bad luck. But hell, I slept off a drunk once and never knowed I shared the bed with a dead man till I sobered up. . . . Them bedrolls at the store belongs to fellers that got wiped out by the Dawsons. But a feller with a handle like Dawson Matthews shouldn't spook at nothin'.

"Spread 'em out here on this bunk next to mine, Dawson. . . Orders is to roundside till moonrise. Then we're crossin' the Missouri to take that Lazy D outfit apart. Then put 'er back together like a sheepherder takes a dollar alarm apart and has the mainspring and the big cogs left over when he gits it back together. . . . When Dad Matthews puts the Lazy D outfit back together all the Dawson parts is goin' to be missin'. All we got to do till moonrise is sleep."

"All but this Dawson Matthews," said a hard flat voice from the doorway. "He's ridin' the Yellow Hornet." The speaker was Rale Matthews.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Death-Ride of the Outlaw Kid

THE Outlaw Kid had never made a money ride in any cowboy contest. Since he had been old enough to saddle his own horse he had ridden horses that would pitch. And as the years went on he had topped some of the hardest bucking horses in the hideouts along the Outlaw Trail. And there had been some mean ones in places like Robbers' Roost and Brown's Hole. Broncs that were kept ornery or were outlaws, like the men who tried to ride them.

The Outlaw Kid had been thrown plenty of times. But Long Red had made him climb aboard again and keep on scratching until he had made a qualified ride. And in the end that bronc would be ridden. Like as not Long Red would collect some bets.

When it came to making a choice between riding a bronc he was afraid of or taking a beating from Long Red, the Outlaw Kid would choose to ride. And so he overcame his fear of a bucking horse and during the past few years he had built up the reputation of being the best bronc rider along the Outlaw Trail. Which, even Long Red would brag, was actually something to holler about.

The Outlaw Kid had made that bragging threat to ride the big buckskin bronc that had thrown Rale Matthews. The cold green eyes of Lea Matthews had goaded him into making that hot tempered boast. Now he was going to carry it out or get thrown trying.

Instead of sleeping, the Flying W cowhands lazed around the bunk house talking broncs. And they were doing some betting.

Blucher Barker had seen the Outlaw Kid ride. And now he was betting on him. And Rale Matthews, a little drunk and more than a little surly, was waving a sheaf of money and offering to bet all or any part of it that the Yellow Hornet would throw this stranger.

The Outlaw Kid had no money to bet on himself. He kept his mouth shut and avoided any kind of a quarrel with Rale. He saw the sharp puckered blue eyes of the garrulous Windy watching Blucher Barker take a roll of money from his pocket. Too much money for a common cowhand to be packing around in the pocket of his Levi overalls.

Blucher Barker and Rale Matthews had been hitting the same bottle. Rale, it seemed, had hired the renegade at Miles City and they had come on to the Flying W ranch together. There was a gun-fight brewing between the Flying W and Lazy D outfits and Rale had been hiring a crew of gun fighting cowhands. He had picked up Blucher Barker at Miles City.

Whiskey made Blucher Barker tight lipped and silent and dangerous. The Outlaw Kid knew that. He watched the little outlaw warily. And Blucher Barker, he could tell, was watching Windy. Which tallied up in the brain of the Outlaw Kid that Blucher suspected the loud mouthed Windy of being a bounty hunter range detective.

That roll of money Blucher Barker was flashing must have come from the Utah train robbery. It was new currency. And there was more than a thousand dollars in the roll.

"All of it," Blucher Barker grinned thinly, "says that this Dawson Matthews will ride your Yellow Hornet bronc to a standstill."

"I've got just about enough," Rale Matthews said, "to cover that bet."

"I'll hold the stakes," rumbled the deep chested voice of Dad Matthews. He loomed as big as a grizzly in the doorway.

Rale's battered face twisted. He started to shove the money back in his pocket but Dad Matthews' huge hand took it. Then he took the roll of banknotes out of Blucher Barker's hand. His big, bellowing laugh filled the log bunkhouse.

Lea Matthews had come in behind her father. She was wearing a flannel blouse and the shabby leather riding skirt that met the tops of her boots below her knees. She was smiling faintly and her green eyes were shining.

"Whichaway you bettin', ma'am?" called Windy.

"The Yellow Hornet is mine," she said, her voice brittle. "But he'll belong to the man who rides him. And where that bronc goes, I go!"

There was a reckless challenge in the green eyes that looked straight at the Outlaw Kid. He felt his bruised face go hot. And he heard Rale Matthews pull in his breath sharply through clenched teeth.

Then Lea Matthews turned and walked out of the bunkhouse.

In the silence that followed the Outlaw Kid could hear the men around him breathing. Dad Matthews stood there in the middle of the long, wide bunkhouse, a wad of crumpled money in each huge fist. The bearded man's bellowing mirth was gone and his ice-green eyes were glittering coldly.

Then, with every man watching him, he got control of himself. His deep chuckle filled the place. But there was no mirth in his eyes.

"She's shore a chip off the old block. And she'll die an old maid. No man ever rode that Yellow Hornet bronc. No damned man is ever goin' to ride that big buckskin outlaw without gittin' throwed."

Dad Matthews was looking hard at the Outlaw Kid and the young cowpuncher outlaw read the grim threat. What the bearded cowman was telling him was that if he wanted to keep on living he had better let that Yellow Hornet outlaw bronc throw him.

"Let's git out there," roared Dad Matthews. "The bets is all laid. That Yellow Hornet is in the corral."

Every man in the Flying W outfit knew just what the big bearded cowman had meant. Dad Matthews was not letting his only daughter throw herself away on some stranger. Rale was the only man he had ever let her go to a dance with or ride with. And it was taken for granted that Lea Matthews was going to marry her foster brother Rale.

Rale was the best bronc rider in that part of the cow country. And in one of his spur jingling tipsy moments had told it in town that the day he rode the Yellow Hornet bronc without being thrown, he was marrying Lea Matthews.

Somebody had carried that whiskey talk of Rale's back to the ranch. Dad Matthews would have killed Rale if he'd had him handy, for making whiskey talk about his daughter.

But Lea had calmed her father down. And at a dance the next week she had told everybody that she'd never marry Rale Matthews till he rode the Yellow Hornet outlaw.

Today was not the first time, by the count of ten or twelve, that Rale Matthews had been thrown by the big line-backed buckskin bronc.

Now the Flying W outfit had heard Lea Matthews sound her reckless challenge. And a rank stranger who called himself Dawson Matthews was taking it up.

"You goin' to buck off?" Blucher Barker rasped harshly.

HE HAD meant to whisper it under the cover of the talk that was going on. But by some freak of luck his harsh whisper came loudly on one of those silences that sometimes fall like a blanket over a crowd.

Every man in the bunkhouse heard it. Rale Matthews heard it and his eyes cut a sharp look at the Outlaw Kid. Dad Matthews heard it and turned in the doorway, halting to get the Outlaw Kid's reply.

"I never bucked off a-purpose in my life," said the Outlaw Kid flatly. "I'm ridin' that Yellow Hornet bronc that throwed Rale Matthews."

Dad Matthews looked at him for a long moment. Then his booming laugh dinned in their ears. He was still roaring with laughter as he led the way to the round corral where the big line-backed buckskin bronc called Yellow Hornet was moving restlessly, kicking up sluggish puffs of corral dust.

They had to rope and throw the big buckskin to get the saddle and hackamore and blindfold on. But Dad Matthews and Rale saw to it that it was done quickly and without tiring the bronc any more than possible.

The Outlaw Kid eased up into his saddle and got both feet in the stirrups.

"Keep the gate shut," Windy called, "till my man rides his bronc around the

corral a few times to git the feel of 'im."

The Outlaw Kid crammed his hat down tight. He looked up at Lea Matthews who sat the top pole of the corral. His battered face grinned up at her. Her red lips parted, moved soundlessly. Her green eyes were shining like emeralds in the setting sun.

"Ride 'im," her lips had said without a sound.

The Outlaw Kid leaned forward and jerked off the blindfold.

Rale Matthews swung the pole gate wide open. Dad Matthews' heavy voice let out a cowboy howl.

The big line-backed buckskin gathered himself. The Outlaw Kid could feel the horse's back arch under the saddle, feel the quiver of powerful muscles as they bunched. Then he swung both long legs forward and the dull rowels of his spurs raked the Yellow Hornet from neck to flanks. The big bronc squealed, dropped its head, and went into the air like a thing on heavy coiled steel springs. Landed slanting. Pitched again. And the next jump landed the bronc and rider outside the open gateway.

The Outlaw Kid rode loosely from the third jump on. He had, by one of those twists of luck, gotten the feel of the bronc. Ride him too tight and you'd be thrown. Take the twists and sunfishing loose and relaxed and you had a chance. Catch him on the rebound. Rake him high, wide and handsome. If ever a man got scared for a second and rode on his spurs he was a goner. You'd leave a spur marked saddle behind and be grabbing bunchgrass.

Rale Matthews had used whiskey to help him. But he had taken on too much booze or not enough. Rale Matthews was probably a better bronc rider than the Outlaw Kid. Rale had no doubt ridden more than one horse that would throw the young cowpuncher outlaw within the first ten jumps. But the Yellow Hornet bronc was made to order for the Outlaw Kid and he rode him like he owned him.

The Outlaw Kid yanked off his hat and fanned the air with it. His long legs never quit swinging. It was his ride from the time the bronc pitched, bawling and squealing and grunting, out through the corral gateway. It was Dawson Matthews' ride. Dawson Matthews' Yellow Hornet bronc. Dawson Matthews' green eyed, black haired girl. If Dad Matthews and Rale let him live to claim her.

THE Outlaw Kid rode the sweating, blowing, bucked-out Yellow Hornet back at a slow, shuffling trot. The pitching had jarred his six-shooter out of its open holster. So that he rode back unarmed to face Dad Matthews and Rale and whatever danger lay waiting.

Ask the men who actually spend their time on the range, in the saddle, riding herd on beef cattle—the real working cow-hands—and they'll tell you that Walt Coburn knows his cow-country, and the men who made it! You'll want to read another colorfully hard-hitting Coburn novel "Death Buys a Trail-Herd," in the current STAR WESTERN. At your newsstand March 4th!

Dad Matthews and Rale were both on horseback. Neither of them had untracked their horses to haze the Outlaw Kid when the bronc had taken him across the open park and on a twisting, dangerous, hard, wild ride down through the box elders and cottonwoods to where the Yellow Hornet quit pitching and suddenly stampeded.

He had dodged tree limbs that would have torn his head off, had sat tight and gritted his teeth and trusted to luck and he had let the big buckskin run himself down like a clock. A couple of hazers or pick-up men could have saved him that dangerous ride on the runaway bronc. But the bearded cowman and his foster son had sat their horses and made no move to help. And that was just about what the Outlaw Kid had expected of them.

Windy and Blucher Barker and the other Flying W cowhands were sitting

on the top pole of the corral like so many buzzards. And apart from them Lea Matthews sat alone on the corral.

She had not moved. She had spoken only once. That was when the Outlaw Kid's six-shooter had been jarred out of its holster and fell in the thick dust by the corral gate.

"Get it," she had told one of the Flying W cowpunchers, "and hand it up to me."

And Windy had been the man who got the gun and handed it up to the girl, a grin on his wide mouth.

Lea Matthews had wiped the dust from the gun with her silk neck scarf and as the Outlaw Kid rode back to the corral she had the six-shooter in her hand.

He saw the girl with his six-shooter. Saw the ugly scowl on Rale's battered face. Dad Matthews chuckling, a dangerous glint in his gray green eyes. The big buckskin bronc was not bridle wise, but the Outlaw Kid managed to sidle the horse alongside the corral. The girl handed him his gun, butt first.

"You may need it," she said quietly. Her green eyes were shining and there was a reckless challenge in her smile.

He rode towards Dad Matthews and Rale, the gun in his hand. Dad Matthews growled something at Rale and the latter's hand came reluctantly away from his gun.

"You don't need that gun," chuckled the bearded cowman. "Put it up. You made your ride. The Matthews pays their bets. Pull your saddle off your Yellow Hornet bronc. He's yourn. Then come over to the house and we'll have a drink. That was the purtiest bronc ride I ever watched."

Dad Matthews' voice was deep and low toned. His gray green eyes were studying the Outlaw Kid with strange intensity.

"Ride on to the barn and take care of your horse," he said quietly. "Then come on to the house."

The bearded cowman motioned Rale to come with him and rode over to the corral. He handed two fistsful of money up to Blucher Barker.

"Come easy, go fast," he chuckled. "That's Rale's way. And yourn, I reckon, mister."

Then Dad Matthews rode over to where his daughter sat on the corral. Her face was a little pale but her green eyes met those of her father without flinching.

The big bearded cowman chuckled softly. "Go on to the house, Lea. You'll find your mother's weddin' dress in that old tin trunk of hers. She'd want you to wear it, I reckon." His voice was low, barely audible.

"What. . . . What do you mean, Dad?"

"A Matthews," he said grimly, "pays their bets. Man or woman. Git on to the house."

Then he reined his horse and rode over to where Rale and the Flying W cowpunchers were.

"Rale, have your fightin' cowhands ketch and saddle their top horses. Give 'em saddle guns and plenty ca'tridges at the store. Tap that keg of likker at the store but see to it that no man gits drunk. Then come on to the house. . . . You bother Dawson Matthews and I'll kill you."

Dad Matthews was chuckling to himself as he whirled his horse and rode away at a long lope, headed for the river. As he vanished from sight among the trees the booming roar of his heavy laugh drifted back to his men.

The Outlaw Kid heard it as he curried the sweat from the big buckskin bronc that no longer spooked and fought him. He was talking to the horse in a low voice, and the bronc was beginning to get used to him and his currycomb and brush.

"You'll be a cow horse some day, Yellow Hornet. The best cow horse that ever turned on a dime and gave back a nickel change."

When he went to the bunkhouse to wash the dirt and sweat off, he was met at the door by Blucher Barker. It was getting dusk and the little outlaw had stepped from the shadow. His six-shooter was pointed at the Outlaw Kid's belly.

"I'm pullin' outa here right now. While that Windy bounty hunter ain't a-watchin'. You killed my brother Seth. I'm killin' you. But the sign ain't right yet. You're comin' with me. And you're takin' me to where you've got that money from the Utah train job hid out. Keep your hands away from your gun, Kid, or I'll

kill you here and now. Walk back to the barn ahead of me. Git goin'."

FROM inside the lighted bunkhouse came the voices of men who had taken a few drinks and were beginning to feel the whiskey inside their bellies. Windy's loud voice was telling some wild yarn, and Rale was cutting in to warn them that he'd whip the hell out of any man that got drunk.

Blucher Barker and his six-shooter were just beyond reach. The Outlaw Kid heard the gun-hammer click to full cock.

"Slow down, Blucher." The Outlaw Kid's voice was flat toned, "before you make a bad mistake. You're drunk."

"Not too drunk to git the job done, Kid."

"You got shot in the fight at Brown's Hole?"

"Scratched. You got away with that haul. The newspapers says you was killed. That sheriff from Rock Springs taken the credit. Him and the sheriff at Vernal rode into Brown's Hole and cleaned it up. The Law says you're dead. That Windy feller is a bounty-hunter. He trailed me here. Mebbyso he's onto you. Mebbyso he ain't. You don't look dead to me, Kid. I want that money you got off with. You killed my brother Seth. I kin send you to hell right—"

"That bounty-hunter in yonder would cut you down before you got your horse," the Outlaw Kid interrupted. "The money went back to the Law, Blucher. I turned it over to Sheriff Hank Sanford at Rock Springs. I'm broke. You and Seth and Slim Green and Heavy Carter double-crossed me'n Long Red. They got what they asked for. You just won a bet off Rale Matthews. You kin ride away with it if you use your head. Crowd your luck now and you'll lose. There just ain't no more money comin' to you, Blucher. I used it to buy my way out of hideouts like Brown's Hole. Why don't you put away that gun and pull out while the goin' is good?"

The Outlaw Kid was stalling. Watching warily for a chance to pull his gun. Here stood the only man who could tell the world that the Outlaw Kid was not dead. As long as Blucher Barker lived there was no such thing as freedom for the young cowpuncher outlaw. He would have to kill Blucher Barker or get killed trying. And right now the cold eyed little killer had the bulge. Blucher was drunk and ugly and his gun was cocked.

"So you bought your way out!" the little outlaw's voice thickened with whiskey fed anger and frustration. "You white livered young—!"

The Outlaw Kid jumped sideways as the gun roared, spitting a streak of flame. The Outlaw Kid felt the burning, searing sting of the bullet grazing his ribs. Then his gun was in his hand, never lifting from the level of its holster, and he shot twice, as fast as he could thumb back the hammer and pull the trigger. As Blucher Barker's second shot tore the ground at the Outlaw Kid's feet.

Blucher Barker had been shot twice through the heart. He went down slowly, limply, and lay there on the ground in front of the bunk house door.

The Outlaw Kid stood there, his smoking gun in his hand, as the door opened. Windy stood in the lighted doorway, a six-shooter in his hand. His big mouth was pulled, flat lipped, in a mirthless grin. Then his puckered blue eyes lost their hardness and he shoved his gun back into its holster.

"Dad Matthews," he said, looking down at the dead outlaw, "is not goin' to like you puttin' him short handed thisaway."

Windy squatted on his boot heels beside the dead man and went through Blucher Barker's pockets with deft speed. He straightened up with the two rolls of banknotes as Rale Matthews appeared in the doorway, his cowpunchers crowding behind him.

"Come easy," Windy grinned widely, shoving the two rolls of money into his pocket, "go easy."

Rale glared at him. Windy's grin was wide but his puckered blue eyes were bleak.

"There's your tough gun-slinger's carcass, Rale," he said. "Take care of it. Me'n Dawson Matthews is havin' a drink on the house."

The Outlaw Kid followed Windy into the bunkhouse. His hands shook a little

as he ejected the two empty shells from his six-shooter and shoved in fresh cartridges. He felt hollow and a little sick at the pit of his stomach.

He felt better when he had taken a drink of whiskey and washed up and put on a clean shirt.

Windy came over to where he stood buttoning his shirt. He had a folded newspaper in his hand. When he spread it on the bunk, the black headlines stared at the young outlaw:

OUTLAW KID KILLED! SHERIFF HANK SANFORD OF ROCK SPRINGS IDENTIFIES DEAD BODY OF YOUNG OUTLAW. LAW HAS COME AT LAST TO BROWN'S HOLE. LOOT FROM UTAH BANK ROBBERY RECOVERED.

"Bin quite a day for you, ain't it?" grinned Windy, folding the newspaper and shoving it in under the tarp covered blankets. "And it's still the shank of the evenin'. I hope your luck don't run out."

Windy walked away with a whiskey bottle in his hand, whistling tunelessly.

Rale Matthews had told his men to carry the dead man out to a shed and wrap the body in a bed tarp. Now he came back into the bunkhouse looking for a drink. Windy handed him the bottle.

The Outlaw Kid walked past them and outside. He saw the barn man leading Dad Matthews' horse and two other horses into the lighted stable.

There were lights burning in the main house. The front door was propped open. The Outlaw Kid walked into the hallway, his hat in his hand. Voices came from the front room of the big log house.

The door to the parlor was open. A big lighted lamp stood on the table. The Outlaw Kid stiffened, blinking his eyes.

He saw Lea Matthews standing with her back to the big fireplace where logs blazed. She was a little pale, and her heavy blue-black hair was freshly done and coiled at the back of her neck. She looked very beautiful and as cold as ice and she was wearing an old-fashioned dress of ivory colored satin.

Standing in the middle of the room were three men. Dad Matthews, big, bearded, stern looking. Old Man Dawson, short, thickset, grim. And between them was the tall, lanky, black-clad figure of Bible Jones!

CHAPTER SIX

After the Wedding, the Hangnoose!

THE Outlaw Kid stood there in the doorway. His blue gray eyes cut a quick look at the girl, caught a warning message in hers, then leveled at the three men.

Bible Jones stared hard at him, his lips moving soundlessly. The Bible peddler had been on one of his periodical drunks. His eyes were still bloodshot and his hands, long, big knuckled, were shaking as he rubbed them together, cracking his knuckles. He stared unwinkingly at the Outlaw Kid, sucking in his breath with a whistling sound. The color drained from his funereal face, leaving it grayish.

Dad Matthews and Old Man Dawson turned their hard, cold eyes on the lanky preacher. Dad Matthews chuckled softly.

"Directly Rale gits here," said the big bearded cowman, "we'll all have us a drink. Then you'll marry my daughter Lea to this feller that calls hisself Dawson Matthews. . . . You look sick preacher." The bearded cowman's deep chuckle filled the room.

Rale Matthews' boot heels sounded in the hallway. The Outlaw Kid stepped inside the room and to one side. Rale strode into the room with a half tipsy swagger. He halted stiffly as he saw Bible Jones. Father and son stared at one another without speaking.

Then Rale's yellow eyes shifted to his foster-father. His voice was harsh, ugly.

"What's this black buzzard doin' here, Dad?"

"There's goin' to be a weddin'," chuckled Dad Matthews, "and later there'll be a hangin'. Bible Jones will do the splicin' and preach the funeral sermon."

Bible Jones' lips moved soundlessly. The Outlaw Kid wondered if the lanky, black-clad preacher was praying. There was a trapped look in his bloodshot eyes and for some reason the Outlaw Kid felt sorry for him. Being called a black buzzard by his own flesh-and-blood son.

Old Man Dawson had not opened his steel trap of a mouth. His pale gray eyes

had been staring hard at the Outlaw Kid.

There was a full bottle of whiskey and five clean glasses on the table. Dad Matthews pulled the cork and filled the glasses to their brim.

A wedding and a hanging. And Old Man Dawson was here under some sort of grim truce to attend both. The Outlaw Kid remembered what Old Man Dawson had said on the other side of the Missouri River. That if such a thing as a Dawson Matthews roamed the face of the earth he would kill it as he'd kill a hydrophobia skunk. . . .

He remembered what Dad Matthews had told him that same morning on this side of the Missouri River deadline between the two warring cow outfits. That if there was a man of such a breed as a Dawson Matthews he would tromp it out. That if he didn't, Old Man Dawson would. And that would be the only thing on Gawdamighty's earth that the two feuding cowmen would ever shake hands on.

Old Man Dawson was here. He and Dad Matthews were about to drink together. There was going to be a hanging.

The Outlaw Kid looked past the men towards Lea Matthews who stood there without moving or speaking. He grinned at her, then walked over to the table and picked up one of the filled glasses. He was looking at Bible Jones when he spoke.

"I killed Long Red. Before he died, he told me that he wasn't my father. That I was kin to the Dawsons. To the Matthews. To ask Bible Jones. I'm askin' you now, sir. Who am I?"

He heard Lea's quick gasp. Saw a quick look pass between Dad Matthews and Old Man Dawson. And as Rale's hand moved towards his gun, the Outlaw Kid repeated his question.

"Who am I, Bible Jones?"

Bible Jones straightened his lanky back and it took every shred of the man's courage to fight down his fear and dread and assume that strange, almost fanatical dignity that he wore with his liquor-stained, rusty black clothes.

"I christened you when you were a child," his sonorous voice fell across the tense silence. "The only child of Dave Matthews and Della Dawson whom I united in marriage. The name they gave you, along with their desperate hope of ending forever a terrible feud that had taken the toll of lives of brave men and broken the hearts of braver women, was the uniting of those names. I christened and baptized you, in the name of the Lord, Dawson Matthews. And may God protect you now, in this hour of peril. Amen!"

Something like a sob escaped the tight throat of Lea Matthews. She crossed the room quickly, the ivory colored satin of the old fashioned wedding gown rustling, to take her stand beside the Outlaw Kid. Her hand reached for his right hand and he felt it, firm and cold and unflinching, in his grasp.

"What," asked the Outlaw Kid quietly, "became of my father and mother, sir?"

"Long Red murdered them," said Bible Jones. "He bushwhacked Dave Matthews. Your mother was digging your father's grave when Long Red rode up. She shot at him, wounded him. He killed her. Then he took their five year

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old son with him down the outlaw trail.

"The Dawsons and the Matthews had turned against Long Red. That was his way of avenging himself. And with his last dying breath he gave you your name and sent you here to be killed by these men who put hatred and cruelty above tolerance and forgiveness and brotherly love."

Bible Jones was no longer ashen gray. His voice was strong, unafraid. His bloodshot eyes glared defiance at Dad Matthews and Old Man Dawson.

"They would have me perform this wedding ceremony as some sort of dismal and grisly farce. That man speaks of a hanging!"

Bible Jones' long forefinger pointed like a gun at Dad Matthews. Then at Old Man Dawson. "And that man, his sworn enemy, declares a truce to take part in that hanging!"

Then Bible Jones dropped his long arms and stood facing his son. There was no hatred in his eyes nor in the tone of his voice. Only contempt and scorn.

"You," he said, his voice low-toned, "have done and still are doing all in your power to fan the flames of hatred between these two cowmen. Even as Long Red played his ugly game, you have done your part to keep alive a terrible feud. Men who have stood in your way, you have killed. You call me a black buzzard. I call you, my own son, a murderer. And may God have mercy on your soul!"

"You and your damned palaver about God!" said Rale, an ugly grin on his battered face, "I don't claim neither of you. I'm called Rale Matthews."

"You're holdin' up the outfit," rumbled Dad Matthews. "Drink up. Then take your curly wolves down to the river to the big cottonwood where the sign is that Dawson Matthews musta forgot to read. It just might be that Wid and Rip and Jode Dawson and their tough hands figger it's a good time to come acrost. If they tackle it, don't shoot to miss."

The bearded cowman chuckled and lifted his drink. Old Man Dawson took his. Rale and Bible Jones and the Outlaw Kid held filled glasses.

"To the bride," said Dad Matthews.

They drank and put down their empty glasses. There was a leering grin on Rale's face.

"And the groom will wear a rope necktie at the weddin' party," he said. "See you at the big cottonwood, Dawson Matthews."

Rale's spurs jingled as he swaggered out of the house. Dad Matthews' booming laugh followed Rale outside. Then the big cowman turned to the Outlaw Kid. "Dave Matthews, your father, was my cousin. He run off with Dawson's sister. That'd make you second-third-fourth cousin to Lea. The Matthews never spoke the name of Dave Matthews after he run off. I don't reckon Dawson here ever spoke the name of his sister after she run off with Dave. . . . I don't reckon Dawson here knowed Long Red had killed her. I never knowed till now that Long Red killed Dave." He looked hard at Bible Jones.

"I was afraid of Red," said the long-haired preacher slowly. "He told me he would kill me if ever I told what I knew. . . . I had a wife I loved. She died when she gave birth to our only child. Mrs. Matthews was a good woman. She adopted my baby and raised the boy as her son. You gave him the Matthews name. You taught him to kill; taught him to despise me, his father whom you just heard him call a black buzzard.

"But this you did not know, until now. Rale has killed Matthews men as well as Dawson men. He kills any man who stands in his way. Rale hopes to own this Flying W outfit and the Lazy D outfit. Just now you sent him forth to kill. He went all too willingly. Rale Jones has learned his lessons well. You will realize that when his gun is turned on you."

"Supposin'," said Dad Matthews, "we git on with the weddin'. Where's your Bible?" His chuckle had an ominous growl in it.

"It was lost," said Bible Jones, when I crossed the river."

The Outlaw Kid took a buckskin covered Bible from his pocket. "It's the one you gave me in Robbers' Roost when I was a kid," he said quietly.

A faint flush came into the sallow leathery cheeks of the preacher. A smile softened his funeral expression.

"It is a thing like this," said the man who had knelt in prayer beside the lonely graves of men who had died along the Outlaw Trail, "that gives me faith again in the God Whose word I preach. You are a good man, Dawson Matthews."

Bible Jones opened the little buckskin covered book.

IT WAS a strange, grim sort of wedding. A six-shooter wedding. As Bible Jones opened the buckskin covered little Bible, Lea Matthews had spoken to the Outlaw Kid in a low tone.

"They'll have to kill me before they hang you. I thought that fool talk I made about whoever rode that bronc could claim me would protect you. Instead, it put a rope around your neck. You needn't consider that this marriage is in any way binding. We don't love each other. We're strangers."

The Outlaw Kid had grinned down at her. "We ain't strangers. Unless you back out right now, I'm holdin' you to every word that preacher says. They might kill me, Lea, but they'll never hang me. And while I'm alive I'll fight. And if I don't git killed off, you're goin' to be my wife. This thing you call love will kinda cold trail us till it ketches up. Now's your last chance to back down, Lea Matthews."

Her green eyes were starry. Her red lips smiled faintly as she whispered, "I never backed down in my life!"

So they stood there, hand in hand, with Dad Matthews and Old Man Dawson standing behind them. And Bible Jones pronounced Dawson Matthews and Lea Matthews man and wife.

The little buckskin-covered Bible closed, and the Outlaw Kid turned quickly, shoving his bride behind him. His six-shooter covered Dad Matthews and Old Man Dawson.

"There ain't goin' to be ary hangin'," he said quietly.

"Mebby not, son," chuckled the big bearded cowman. "You ain't kissed your bride. Me'n Dawson and Bible Jones ain't drunk to the bride and groom. And the bride's father is supposed to kiss her and shake hands with her man. Put up that gun, son. You'll never have cause to use it on me or Old Man Dawson."

Dad Matthews was no longer chuckling. His voice was deep and soft. He took Lea's face in his big hands, bent down and kissed her.

"You got the best man I could drag up to the brandin' fire, young 'un. Hang onto 'im."

Tears did not come easily to the emerald green eyes of Lea Matthews. But they came now as her arms went around her father's neck.

Old Man Dawson's traplike mouth grinned. He shoved out a gnarled hand, and broke his long silence. "I'm proud to claim you, Dawson Matthews. Your mother was my favorite sister. Headstrong and prideful. You got a lot of her Dawson grit."

"Dad Matthews chuckled and gripped the Outlaw Kid's hand in a bone crushing handshake. "Me'n Dave was closer'n brothers when we wasn't quarrelin'. You got Dave's eyes. You got his headlong ways. You're a Matthews, son. And you're home to stay."

It was too bewildering for the Outlaw Kid. Dad Matthews was filling glasses. Passing them to Old Man Dawson and Bible Jones. His big laugh was genuine now.

"Dad blame it, boy!" he roared. "Kiss your bride!"

The Outlaw Kid took his bride in his arms and kissed her. Her lips were warm against his and her arms were around his neck.

"For ever and ever and always," she whispered against his mouth.

"For keeps, Lea," he told her.

Spurs jingled in the hallway. The clump of boot heels. Windy stood in the doorway. There was a smear of blood on his cheek where a bullet had nicked his tough hide.

"They're at the big cottonwood where the sign is nailed. The four of 'em. Their curly wolves has turned coyote, scared of the Law. But Rale and Wid and Rip and Jode is on their way here."

"You told Rale what I said to tell him?" said Dad Matthews.

Windy nodded. "I told him you was onto the game he's bin playin' with Wid and Rip and Jode. That you'd hired me

to git proof and I'd done so. I had to make a fast getaway." Windy grinned and wiped the blood from his face. There was a badge pinned to his flannel shirt.

Dad Matthews shoved a filled glass at the range detective. "Drink to the bride and groom, Windy."

"That's one drink," grinned Windy, "that my tongue's bin' a-hangin' out for. Good luck to you both. Here's walkin' on the grave of the Outlaw Kid."

Dad Matthews held out his hand towards Bible Jones. His hard eyes shadowed. "I blamed you for helpin' Dave and Della Dawson run off together, Parson. So did Old Man Dawson. That's why I give Rale his head, taught him to be ornery. You're right. His gun is turned on me, now. And he's turned them three shirt-tail cousins of Dawson's ag'in' him. Rale and Wid and Rip and Jode is ridin' here to kill us all off. I'd like to shake hands with you and so would Dawson. Me'n him have foreseen this thing a-comin'. We've talked it over without nobody knowin'. There's no war between him and me."

Bible Jones shook hands solemnly with the two cowmen. Then Dad Matthews told him to take Lea and go to the squaw's cabin. They'd be safer there.

Lea took a carbine from the gun rack and handed another to Bible Jones. The squaw, she said, had a rifle and knew how to use it. Bible Jones shoved the buckskin-covered Gospel in the tail pocket of his rusty black coat and took the gun. Lea led him out the back way. She had wished them good luck with a smile, her eyes glinting green. In the old fashioned ivory silk wedding gown she made a picture that the Outlaw Kid would forever cherish in his memory.

Dad Matthews and Old Man Dawson grinned at the Outlaw Kid, then at each other. "Both outfits," said Dad Matthews, "was almighty short-handed till you showed up."

"Short-handed as hell," snapped Old Man Dawson.

"You didn't make it easy on me," said the Outlaw Kid.

"We couldn't have ary way of knowin'," said Dad Matthews, "what kind of a man you was. What your game would be. You was the Outlaw Kid. You'd bin raised by Long Red, the orneriest man that ever rode the Outlaw Trail."

"You knew who I was?"

"Before you got here. Windy sighted you a few days ago when you camped back in the badlands. He'd seen you before. He told me'n Dawson that the Outlaw Kid wasn't dead like the newspapers claimed. That you was headed this way. But when you called yourself Dawson Matthews you shore gave us both a jolt. Neither of us knowed there was a Dawson Matthews. But we did know that you was the Outlaw Kid. A range-detective like Windy don't make mistakes."

"I'd cold trailed you and Long Red more than once," grinned Windy. "I'd seen you with Long Red and the Barkers and Slim Green and Heavy Carter. Different times."

"I don't remember you, Windy."

"There's times when I don't act so windy. When I kinda stay in the background to watch and listen. Hide behind a month's growth of whiskers and keep my mouth shut. Then shave off the brush I bin hidin' behind and run off at the head like a magpie. Makes a good disguise."

They had made it as tough as they knew how for the Outlaw Kid. He had given himself the name of Dawson Matthews and lived up to it. And Bible Jones had proven that it was his real name.

He told them about the deal he had made with Sheriff Hank Sanford at Rock Springs. The two cowmen and the range detective said that it looked as if Hank Sanford had tied the deal with the Law. Made his dicker with the railroads and banks.

Bible Jones had just come from Brown's Hole, Dad Matthews said. Sheriff Hank Sanford had shown the preacher the graves of Long Red and the other outlaws. And there was one grave that the sheriff of Rock Springs said held the dead body of the Outlaw Kid. Bible Jones had fashioned a wooden headboard that read, "Here Lies the Outlaw Kid. May His Soul Rest in Peace."

No wonder the preacher had turned gray when the Outlaw Kid walked into the room, a prospective bridegroom.

"Now," chuckled Dad Matthews, tak-

ing a saddle-gun from the rack, "Let's git goin'. We're meetin' Rale and them Dawsons at the river."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Prophecy of Bible Jones

THE odds were even. There would be no quarter asked or expected. The moon was rising as Dad Matthews, Old Man Dawson, Windy and the Outlaw Kid rode away from the ranch and down through the badlands to the Missouri River. There were patches of moonlight ridges. Black shadows in the cut-coulees and canyons, and the smell of scrub pines. The howl of a gray wolf. . . . While Rale and the three Dawsons waited at the big cottonwood, with its bullet-pocked warning sign. The stars were cold and bright in the cloudless sky, where a lopsided white moon showed. And death lurking in the black shadows along the Missouri River.

Dad Matthews and Old Man Dawson rode in the lead. They reached a place not far from the river where the trail split into a Y shaped fork.

"Me'n Dawson take this left-hand trail," said Dad Matthews. "Windy, you'n Dawson Matthews take the other. When you hear that beller of mine, come a-shootin'."

"And don't shoot to miss," snapped Old Man Dawson.

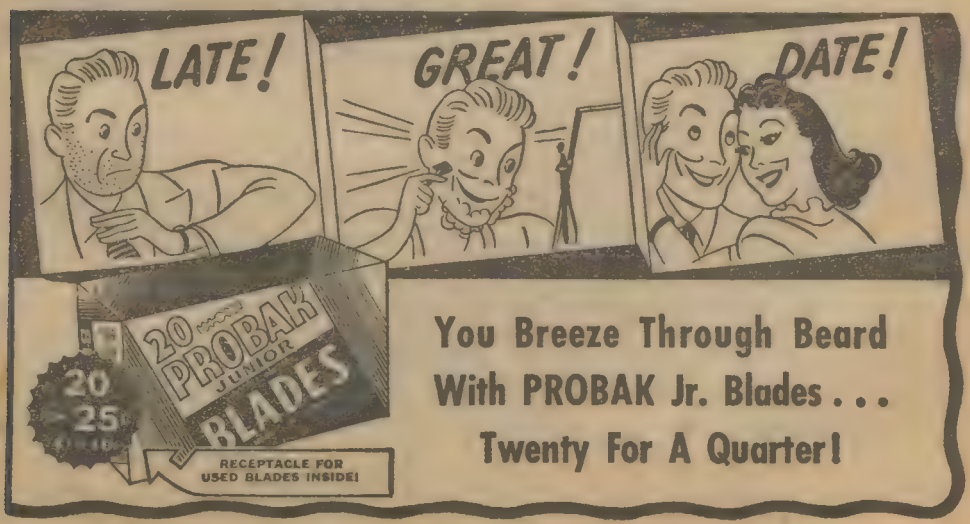
They separated. The Outlaw Kid wondered if they were riding into a bushwhacker trap. Windy grinned and said that those two cowmen was old hands at this game. That they savvied how to spring any kind of a bushwhacker trap.

But he had hardly gotten the words out when the night's silence was ripped apart by the crash of gunfire.

Then through the echoing crack of guns sounded the bellowing laugh of Dad Matthews. The rasping cussing of Old Man Dawson. Windy and the Outlaw Kid opened their horses to a run and rode into the fight on the river bank.

Dad Matthews had mounted them on iron gray geldings sired by his big gray Morgan stud. So that they would know one another by the color of the horses they rode. And it was by those gray horses that they were able now to tell enemy from friend, because the gun fight was on horseback. Rale and the three Dawson cousins were not setting themselves afoot tonight. They figured that they might have to make a fast getaway.

Saddle guns cracked. Spurts of gun flame streaked the shadows. A riderless iron gray horse stampeded back along the trail, stirrups flapping. A rider on another gray horse charged a brush patch and his bellowing laugh identified him as Dad Matthews. Old Man Dawson had been shot from his saddle. But he lay in behind a patch of buckbrush, a spitting gun in his hand.



Then Windy's gray horse somersaulted and the range detective was a motionless heap at the edge of a brush patch.

Bullets whined around the Outlaw Kid's head. Two men rode in behind some brush and the Outlaw Kid charged the brush patch at a dead run. Crashing into its thick red willow tangle. Shooting as he went. He felt the burning sting of a bullet cutting his left shoulder. Another steel jacket .30-30 bullet nicked his ear. Then he was shooting point blank at Rale Matthews and Wid Dawson, using his six-shooter. Firing as fast and straight as he knew how.

His horse piled up, tripped by the brush and heavy undergrowth of tangling vines. He landed with a crash on his head and one shoulder. There was a blinding glare of gunfire in his face. Then blackness.

The Outlaw Kid blinked his eyes open. Water was drenching his head and face. Dad Matthews' rumbling voice rolled like thunder.

"Fetch another hatful, Windy. Can't tell if he's dead till we git this damn blood washed off his head and face. . . . He charged that brush like he was a whole cavalry troop. That damn' Rale was fixin' to blow his head plumb off, but got his own tore open with the last ca'tridge I had in my gun. . . .

"Another hatful, Windy. The hell with your busted laig. Hop on your good 'un! Gawdamighty, if this boy's dead, I better keep on ridin' outa the country. I told that young 'un of mine I'd send him back alive. I told you to rap him acrost the head with a gun-barrel back yonder when you heard me beller. Don't whine about no busted laig to me, badge-polisher. What am I payin' you fightin' money for? I told you to knock him cold."

"He got away from me. He was into that fight before you could say scat. Past me and went like a bat outa hell—"

A hatful of water cascaded into the Outlaw Kid's face. He gasped and sputtered and spat blood and water, then sat up dizzily.

"Don't drown a man," he gasped breathlessly.

Dad Matthews sat back on his hunkers. The big cowman's shirt was sodden with blood and one of his arms dangled uselessly. His hard gray-green eyes glinted under bushy brows.

"He's alive, Windy. Settin' up. Talkin'!"

"Six-eight trips to that river and back on a busted laig," said Windy. "I'm tuckered out."

Dad Matthews said that there should be a bottle somewheres, for Rale and the three Dawson cousins worked on likker. They wouldn't any of 'em need whiskey no more, where they'd gone. Or did the Devil have a jug in Hell? He'd have to ask Bible Jones.

Bible Jones didn't have the answer to that one. But he did have a black doctor's bag fitted with everything a cow-country doctor used. He showed up now, riding behind Lea Matthews. Lea, who had changed her old ivory satin wedding dress for shabby leather riding skirt and buckskin blouse and boots. Riding with a saddle gun in her hand.

She and Bible Jones went to work on Dad Matthews, the Outlaw Kid and Windy. Old Man Dawson was dead. He had taken Rip and Jode with him across the Big Divide, Dad Matthews said. And that was the way the ornery, hard-hating cowman had wanted it.

"He told me back along the trail," said Dad Matthews, "that he hadn't anything to live for. That all he wanted was a chance to kill Wid and Rip and Jode who had thrown in with Rale to double-cross him. He said he wanted his Lazy D outfit to go to Dawson Matthews. So he died as he has lived. Tough and ornery, with his boots on and his gun smokin'. Him and me still hatin' one another. But I'm shore glad we had a drink together before he died. That he forgive Della and claimed her son. Mebbyso it'll make his trail easier yonder side of the Big Divide."

The Outlaw Kid's scalp was bullet ripped. His other wounds were slight. Dad Matthews' arm had been broken below the shoulder. Windy had broken a leg when his horse had stepped in a stump hole and somersaulted. Bible Jones patched them with a surgeon's skill. Lea helped him with swift, sure hands.

They rode back to the ranch. Bible Jones said he would attend to the dead.

It was a job that he had done many times for men whose names he did not know. Tonight he was burying his own son. He wanted to be left alone.

Dad Matthews rode up to the big cottonwood and saw the rope with a hangman's noose dangled from a low limb. The bearded cowman said that Rale had made it ready for Dawson Matthews. Then Windy had told him that Dad Matthews intended the hang-rope for his foster-son, Rale. Dad Matthews yanked the rope down. Then he tore down the bullet-pocked sign that warned men to keep off his Flying W range.

"It was a good clean fight," Dad Matthews told Windy as they headed back along the wagon trail to the ranch. "Not a horse killed. I shore hate to see a horse crippled in a man's gun-fight."

Windy said that as soon as his broken leg mended he was pulling out for Rock Springs, Wyoming, taking a message to Sheriff Hank Sanford. He'd tell the sheriff that the Outlaw Kid might be dead, but that there was a young feller named Dawson Matthews who was shore sorry the sheriff had missed being at his wedding.

Bible Jones, Lea said, as she rode along with her bandaged husband, was something of a prophet. Years ago, she told the Outlaw Kid, Bible Jones had given her one of his little Bibles.

"Don't never marry, Lea," he had said. "Above all, don't marry Rale. There is a boy and his name is Dawson Matthews. I'm going to tell you the story of that boy. It is a secret that you must never share with anyone. You will never hear mentioned the names of Dave Matthews or Della Dawson. They are dead. They put love above hatred. They both believed in God, but their lives were blighted by tragedy. Their son is an outlaw. But if my prayers are answered, he will ride here some day.

"That boy, Dawson Matthews, has a little pocket Bible I left him. Here is yours. The last two I have to give to anyone. Now sit there, my child, and I will tell you the story of Dave Matthews and Della Dawson, and their only son whom they named Dawson Matthews. Listen well. Forget none of it. Because if God is kind, he will send Dawson Matthews to you some day. And he is the man you will marry."

"And so," Lea said softly, when she had finished her story, "That prophecy of Bible Jones has come true. When you told me who you were, there in the store, I knew. But I did not know that I would be telling this to my true husband."

They rode on in silence, holding each other's hand. They needed no words. . . .

Tomorrow headboards would mark those new graves on the bank of the Missouri River. One of those boards would be deeply carved with the true name of Rale Jones.

Bible Jones would probably ride to Landusky. He would get a jug of whiskey and take it to his lonely camp in the badlands. And when he had gotten drunk, then sobered up, he'd ride back down the Outlaw Trail.

He'd visit the graves along its lawless way, stopping at places like the Hole-in-the-Wall, Brown's Hole, and Robbers' Roost. And in those places he'd find a welcome.

Around the outlaw campfires Bible Jones would tell the story of the Outlaw Kid, and that story would be kept secret by those renegades who had known the young outlaw. But, years later, the saga of the Outlaw Kid would be known all along the mysterious route called the Outlaw Trail. . . .

THE END

BIG TIMBER HATE

By PHILIP KETCHUM

I saw the struggling figures of two men. . . .

Only up in the big woods country do they grow men like Jim Brockman, timber boss—or like young Tom Kinney, whose sole heritage was burning hate for every breath Brockman drew . . . Yet they both were to learn that sometime one enemy who remains loyal to an old hatred is more to be prized than a dozen lukewarm friends. . . .

THERE was quite a crowd in Portage that night and Webber's saloon was jammed with loggers in from the woods. Jim Brockman was there, taking a hand in a stud game, for he liked to mix with his men. And Jules Duvall, his woods boss, who was as big and as

tough a man as you could find in the Northwest. And Ole Christman and Pat Hoke and Ed Copperstone and a lot of the old timers who had worked for Brockman for twenty years or more.

It was a pay-night, but it was more than that. Word had just come in that the ice in Devil's Gap was cracking up, and that meant that we would be starting our logs down the Crazy River right away. We had been cutting all winter in the Triangle and had been looking forward to the drive. There wasn't a man working for Jim Brockman who didn't know just how many million feet of lumber we had to get down the river in order to meet Brockman's contract, and on what date we had to deliver. And the ice going out early, this way, meant that we were going to make it all right.

So in a way, this was a night for celebration, for again, Jim Brockman had gambled and won. I reckon we were all feeling pretty happy. I know Jim Brockman was. He sat there at that poker table losing hand after hand and just laughed at the luck of the cards. Then suddenly he stopped laughing and I saw him staring toward the door. I looked that way and caught my breath.

Tom Kinney had just come in.

My first thought was that Black Dan Kinney had come back to life—Tom looked that much like his father. He was well over six feet tall, and he was broad shouldered and flat across the belly and he carried himself like a man who knew where he was going. He had Black Dan's square, stubborn jaw, too, and wide mouth and curling, dark hair. His eyes circled the room and fastened on Brockman.

As he started forward I was reminded of the eight-year-old boy who had been sent to relatives in the States, fifteen years before. And how that boy had stood on the deck of the old *Island Queen,* shaking his fists at the crowd on the shore and screaming that he would return.

He had hated to be sent away, that young kid who was Tom Kinney, and I suppose he blamed Jim Brockman for it. It came natural for a Kinney to blame a Brockman, or a Brockman to blame a Kinney.

Back in those old days there had been two big men here in the north woods—Black Dan Kinney and Jim Brockman—and the story of their battle against one another is a story of one of the toughest fights the woods have ever known.

They had started out together, two independent young lumberman against the Rocco outfit. They had whipped Rocco to a stand-still, then over something or other, they had split up. There are some mighty tall tales of the fights which followed, and which ended, suddenly and abruptly, with the accidental death of Tom's mother and father, and the shipping of young Tom to an aunt in the States.

All those memories flashed through my mind as I saw Tom Kinney move across the saloon toward Brockman and as I saw Brockman stand up and face him. It seemed to me that there was a momentary, welcoming smile on Brockman's lips, but if so, it was gone almost at once.

"Well, I'm back, Brockman," Kinney said suddenly.

Jim Brockman scowled but made no other answer. It was clear, at least to me, that he didn't know quite what to say. He seemed puzzled. He wasn't quite as tall as Tom but he was heavier and looked more rugged and powerful. His hair was beginning to gray and there were deep lines around his mouth, but he showed his age in no other way. He could still handle an axe with any man on his crew, and he wasn't afraid of anything that walked. The years hadn't done anything to Jim Brockman except temper the steel in his make-up.

A good deal of the noise in the saloon had died out. Maybe a third of the men there had recognized Tom Kinney and his name had been whispered to the others. Everyone was watching him. Jules Duvall had left the bar and moved toward the poker table, his coarse, bearded face showing an unusual curiosity in this son of Black Dan Kinney. Jules had never seen Black Dan but he had heard plenty of stories about him.

"Well, I'm back, Brockman," Tom Kinney said again. "Did you think you could log the Triangle without me finding out about it?"

Brockman was still scowling. He shook his head. "It never occurred to me that

you would be interested in knowing, Tom."

"I own half interest in the Triangle," Tom Kinney snapped.

Again Brockman shook his head. "Your father owned half interest in the Triangle. I bought him out, long ago."

Kinney stiffened. "That's a lie," he said clearly.

YOU could have heard a pin drop during the moment that followed, the saloon was that still. I stared from Brockman to Kinney. The flush on Brockman's face had deepened and the lines around his mouth were tighter. His fists had clenched and he was breathing heavily. I knew what was going to happen. I think every man there knew what was going to happen. No man in the world could call Jim Brockman a liar and get by with it.

But things didn't work out just as I thought they would.

Before Brockman could step around the table, before he could say a word, Jules Duvall moved into the picture. Perhaps he had had too much to drink. Perhaps he had heard too many stories of the prowess of old Black Dan Kinney and thought that he could add to his own stature by taking on Black Dan's son. Or perhaps he was just spoiling for a fight. Whatever the reason, Jules Duvall suddenly thrust himself forward and caught Kinney by the shoulder.

"Let me handle this fellow, Brockman," he said thickly. "Let me—"

I never in my life saw a man move faster than Tom Kinney did just then. He twisted away from that grasp of Duvall's and his hand whipped up and slapped Duvall across the cheek. It sounded like the report of a pistol, and it sent Duvall reeling backwards, a look of stark amazement on his face.

Kinney hardly glanced at the men. "You'd better keep out of this, mister," he said crisply. "You might get hurt." And then he looked back at Brockman again and said, still in that sharp tone, All right, Brockman. I'm waiting for an explanation."

Jules Duvall was close to seven feet tall and he must have weighed two fifty, not an ounce of which was fat. There was a story going around that up in the Utretch country he had killed a man with one blow of his fist, and I didn't question it. He was all bone and muscle and there wasn't a trick in the rough-house game that he didn't know. He was a bully, sure. But he was a good woods boss, too. Men didn't carry any liquor back into the camps when Duvall told them not to. They had too much respect for the way he enforced his orders.

Kinney's blow had staggered him backwards but it hadn't hurt him. Those words of Kinney's, however, must have seared him like fire. A sudden, dark rage streaked across his face.

I don't think that Duvall was even aware of what Kinney had added to Brockman or of Brockman's shout ordering him to stop. A bull-like roar tore from his throat and he started for Kinney as though he meant to tear him to pieces.

Tom Kinney managed to get out of the way of those flailing fists. He must have sidestepped and twisted his body just enough so that those first blows missed or slid off of his arms and shoulders. And then he stepped in and brought up his own fists. It didn't look like he was hitting hard at all, but once again Jules Duvall was staggered.

Brockman had made it around the table by now, and had caught Duvall by the arm and was yelling at him to stop, but it was no use. Duvall jerked free and rushed in at Kinney again. For a full minute the two of them stood toe to toe, slugging it out.

I hadn't thought I'd ever see anything like that. I hadn't thought I'd ever see anyone anywhere who could stand up to Jules Duvall and swap him blow for blow. But Tom Kinney was doing it, and there was the same look in Kinney's eyes as I had seen many a time in the eyes of his father—a bold, mocking look that could goad a man to fury.

It did just that to Jules Duvall. He backed off and then rammed at Kinney, head down, but Kinney twisted aside and jerked his knee up into Duvall's face. Duvall caught him in his arms and they went down, heavily, rolled over a couple of times, slugging, gouging and kicking, and then broke free of each other and

scrambled to their feet and went at it again.

They were both marked up, now, and were gasping for breath. It seemed to me that Kinney was a lot slower as he moved in. I knew that the fight was about over. The men aren't made who can stand up against as tough a battering as these two had handed out and were handing out again, for once more they were standing toe to toe and slugging.

Someone yelled, "Fifty on Duval."

"Taken," Brockman snapped. "And as much more as any of you want to put up."

Duvall had reeled off under a sudden, grim attack. But he wasn't through. He charged in again, head lowered, and Kinney side-stepped, caught him by the shoulder and crotch and swung him off the floor. I didn't see how he did it, but suddenly Duvall was in the air, high over Kinney's head, and Kinney was moving toward the door. He made it, kicked the door open and threw Duvall outside.

The sudden and dramatic end to that battle had left us all breathless. For a moment there wasn't a sound in the room and then I heard Brockman whispering, "Just like his father, every inch of him! Just like Black Dan Kinney."

I glanced over at Jim Brockman. He looked actually pleased, then as Kinney swung around and came back, that look disappeared and his face tightened up.

Tom Kinney's legs weren't very steady as he moved back into the saloon, and he was breathing hard. He didn't look as neat as when he had come in. There was a swelling under one eye and his lip was cut and puffed. His shirt was half torn off. But the fight hadn't toned him down any.

"I still want that explanation," he said bluntly, staring straight at Brockman. "Half the timber on the Triangle belongs to me."

Brockman shook his head. "You're wrong, Tom."

"And you're a liar and a thief."

Jim Brockman took a couple steps forward, his fists clenched. And then he stopped and sucked in a long, haggard breath, and only those of us who knew him well could understand what a struggle it must have been for him to keep his temper.

He said, "Tom, I'll take that from you tonight, because you've had about all one man can stand. But don't repeat what you've just said tomorrow. If you stay in Portal, keep out of my way. If you want a job in the woods, see the man you just whipped."

That sounded mighty fine to me, mighty fair and square, for I didn't think there was a thing to Tom Kinney's claim of part ownership of the timber on the Triangle. But it wasn't what Tom Kinney wanted to hear. It wasn't the kind of talk the son of Black Dan Kinney could take. He shook his head and a laugh rumbled in his throat.

"I'm back, Brockman," he said shortly. "Back to stay and to claim my share of the timber you've cut on the Triangle. My name, in case it's slipped your mind, is Kinney. And a Kinney means what he says."

Jim Brockman made no answer to that, and Tom Kinney turned and left the saloon.

A buzz of conversation started up as soon as he was gone and some of the men who had hurried out to see how badly Duvall was hurt lugged the woods boss back into the saloon.

A good slug of whiskey brought him around, and he struggled to his feet, cursing and asking where Kinney could be found and boasting about what would happen the next time they met.

Jim Brockman walked over to face him. "There'll be no next time, Duvall," he said bluntly. "Keep away from Kinney. That's an order."

Duvall mopped a hand over his battered face. He seemed as much stunned at Brockman's words as he did at what had happened to him.

"I mean that," Brockman emphasized. "I mean it for all of you. Leave Tom Kinney alone. If there's any settling to be done, I'll do it myself."

THERE wasn't any answer to that. The crowd broke up into small groups but the talk, everywhere, was the same. Old stories of the rivalry between Black Dan Kinney and Jim Brockman were revived.

Someone recalled that the timber on the Triangle was one of the things the two men had owned in common at the time of their battle with the Rocco Lumber Company, but everyone understood that Brockman had bought out all of Black Dan's holdings after his death. The money had gone to the aunt in the States for the care of young Tom. And a good part of what Brockman had bought had been worthless. Everyone knew that, too. A lot of us had figured that Brockman was a chump to do so much for the kid.

I moved over to the bar and ordered a drink and carried it to a table in the back part of the saloon. Pretty soon Jim Brockman joined me. There was a grin on his face and his eyes were shining.

"Did you ever see anything like it, Matt?" he chuckled. "Did you ever see anything like it?"

Not since the days of Black Dan Kinney," I admitted.

"The kid's like him, isn't he? Every inch a man. Hell, he's been raised in the States, pampered by a bunch of female relatives, sent to college, educated to be a gentleman. Yet he comes up here and whips the toughest man the woods can turn out and added to that, he calls me a liar to my face in my own town."

"Sort of like his father, isn't he?"

Brockman rubbed his hands together. "So much like his father that I could have hugged him."

I leaned forward and said something then that I had always suspected but of which I had never been sure. I said, "You loved Black Dan Kinney, didn't you, Jim? You thought more of him than anyone in the world."

Jim Brockman nodded. "We fought like two hellcats, but never with any bitterness. We drove each other on until we were both big men. But back of it all —Matt, you don't know this; there isn't a man living that knows it, but when I was caught short on a falling lumber market, twenty years ago, Black Dan Kinney walked into my hotel room in Seattle one night and threw fifty thousand dollars in cash right into my face. He said that he wouldn't be able to have any fun out of life if I was wiped out.

I paid him back a couple years later when he got stuck with a year's cut on his hands, a cut contracted for by a Jap firm that didn't come through. I organized a dummy company and bought his logs and peddled them in Mexico. Yeah, we had some great years, Black Dan Kinney and I."

"And this Triangle timber?"

"I bought Black Dan's interest a month before he was killed. He needed the cash and I had it. George Griggs, my lawyer, arranged the deal. Of course the timber wasn't worth much then. I didn't think I'd ever log it."

I finished my drink and looked across at Jim Brockman, scowling. "Look here, Jim," I said finally. "Why not go and see Tom Kinney? Why not tell him what you've just told me?"

"He wouldn't believe me."

"But he could look up the title to the timber. He could see that it was in your name."

"And he'd still figure I was crooked. No, Matt. I'm going to let him fight, and when this drive is over he can have half

of what I've made on it. That'll be enough to get him started, and really, I owe it to him. I told you I didn't pay much for Black Dan's rights to the timber on the Triangle."

I shook my head. "It won't be like it was before, Jim. Young Tom Kinney will be bitter. There's nothing nice about a fight like that."

"What else can I do?"

"Tell him the truth."

Brockman stood up. He shook his head. "His father was never bitter and the kid's like him. He'll put up a good scrap. I'm anxious to see what he does."

I had another drink and then left the saloon and headed for the hotel. Though it was pretty cold, Tom Kinney was sitting alone in a chair out on the hotel's porch.

He wore a heavy mackinaw and was smoking a short, stubby pipe. By the light from the hotel window I could see that he was scowling.

I joined him, pulled a chair over close to his and sat down and said, "My name's Matt Price. Maybe that doesn't mean anything to you, Tom, but I was around when you were born. I knew both your mother and father quite well. In the days before you left for the States you used to call me Uncle Matt."

I thought that would get a rise out of him, and it did, but not in the way I expected. "If you're Matt Price," Kinney snapped, "what in the hell are you doing working for Jim Brockman?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "A man's got to work, hasn't he?"

"Aren't there any other logging outfits?"

"None as good as Jim Brockman's. None as good to work for."

A harsh laugh broke from Tom Kinney's throat. "The Uncle Matt I used to know," he said bluntly, "hated the ground Jim Brockman walked on."

I shook my head. "Nope. I was loyal to your father and he fought Jim Brockman as hard as he could. But I didn't hate him. And there were great battles in those old days, Tom. We fought hard but clean. We weren't bitter."

"Brockman's a crook. Half the timber on the Triangle is mine, left me by my father."

"Brockman bought it from your father."

"That's a lie. I've seen the record."

THERE wasn't much I could answer to that and I wondered if there was a possibility that Kinney was correct. If he was, I was sure that Brockman didn't know it.

"I know all about Brockman," Tom Kinney went on. "I know how he shipped me out of here to my aunt in the States and how he talked her into taking a few dollars for the holdings my father had here in the north. There wasn't anything I could do about it then. I was only eight and my aunt was appointed my legal guardian. But I'm grown up now. Things are different. There's a Kinney back in the woods and Brockman's going to hear about it."

He wasn't just boasting. I could tell that by his tone of voice. He was deadly serious and he was sure of himself.

"Let me tell you something, Matt," he went on. "All my life I've looked forward to the day when I could come back up here. Everything I've done has been with that in mind. I went to college not to study history or ethics or foreign languages, but to learn how to fight in courts. I studied law. And I took up boxing and wrestling and athletics, not as a sport, but to learn how to take care of myself as I did with that bully tonight. I ate what I should as a kid, kept away from liquor and went to bed early and things like that, just to make myself fit for what was ahead. Maybe that all sounds damned foolish but it wasn't foolish to me. And maybe Brockman will beat me, but if he does he'll know he's been in a fight."

I was silent for a moment, then I said, "You could be wrong about him, you know. He might not be as bad as you think, Tom."

Kinney shook his head and stood up. "I'm not wrong."

"But you are, Tom," I said flatly.

Tom Kinney's teeth clamped down on his pipe. "Did Brockman send you here?"

"No."

"I don't believe you," Kinney snapped. "Anyhow, you can tell him this for me. I'll wait here until tomorrow night for

some word from him. If none comes, not a log from the Triangle will reach the Big Muddy. That'll hurt him. You see, I happen to know that Brockman has spread himself rather thin and has contracted for delivery of a hundred million feet of timber just about a month from now. If he doesn't make it, he's smashed, and if he doesn't come to terms with me, he'll never make it."

"He'll never come to see you, Tom."

"Then he'll know what to expect."

I shook my head. "And you can't stop his drive. All the injunctions in the world would never stop him. Or if you're thinking of bringing in a crew to fight you can't find the men in the woods who can stand up against Brockman's crew."

Tom Kinney said, "Give him my message, Matt. I'll wait here until tomorrow night."

After Tom Kinney had gone in I walked on over to the room where I stay when I'm in Portage. I didn't feel very well pleased with myself. Every minute there on the porch of the hotel had reminded me of Black Dan Kinney. I had thought more of Black Dan than any man I ever knew, unless maybe it was Jim Brockmon. They had been so much alike that they could never get along together. And I found myself liking young Tom just as I had liked his father, and worrying about him.

I wasn't worrying that he couldn't take care of himself. He had proven that in what he had done to Jules Duvall. But I was worried about what he was going to do, and about the bitterness which motivated him.

In all of their fighting, Black Dan and Jim Brockman had never hurt each other. To win out, each had kept getting bigger crews and taking on bigger contracts. And if one gained an inch on the other in one spot, he lost it somewhere else.

Battles like that really go under the name of competition. What young Tom Kinney had in mind, was something else. I didn't have any notion what he could do, but I knew that he hadn't been bluffing.

The next morning I gave Jim Brockman his message and Brockman only grinned. "So I've got a fight on my hands!" he muttered. "It's like old times, Matt. How do you reckon Kinney will try to stop me?"

I said I didn't know. Then I said, "Jim, you'd better check in to Kinney's claim. Maybe the transfer of title for Black Dan's interest in the Triangle timber was never registered."

Brockman nodded. "I will, but I know I bought Black Dan out."

"Will you go and see Tom?" I asked bluntly.

"Hell, no! What would be the point in that?"

I looked Brockman straight in the eye. "Maybe no point at all," I answered. "But I don't like it. You know me, Jim. I never backed out of a fight in my life, but I don't like the kind of a fight that's building up. I don't want the kid to get started wrong."

Brockman chuckled. "Then go join up with him. It'll be all right with me, Matt. You know, that kid's going places. He's got Black Dan's drive. I'm not going to have it so easy any more."

TOM KINNEY waited around for a day, just as he had promised, and then when Jim Brockman didn't show up near the hotel, he disappeared. He didn't say where he was going when he checked out and no one seemed to have noticed him leave.

I didn't join him, of course. I'd made up my mind to keep out of it, no matter what developed, and that was quite a decision for Matt Price to make. Like any of the rest of the loggers, I like a good fight.

It didn't seem like we were going to have one, however. A couple of weeks passed with no word of Tom Kinney. During that time the ice went out all up along the Crazy River and we cut our boom chains and started the long drive to the Big Muddy. . . .

It's when the logs start down the river that the real work begins, but we didn't anticipate much trouble. Crazy River isn't at all like its name. It's only bad in a couple of places, through the Narrows and at Devil's Gap, just above the Big Muddy, and we planned to string out the drive so that there wouldn't be any

danger of a jam at those two spots. Any other jams couldn't be very bad.

Jim Brockman came to me the day we got started and said, "Matt, I want you to head down to Devil's Gap. Two Irishmen named Murphy have been cutting just above there. They promised me to keep their timber out of the river until we were past but I don't want to take any chances. Logs pile up when they go through the Gap and it takes a crew to handle 'em. The Murphys don't have a crew. You make sure they keep their timber back."

I scowled at Brockman. "What's the matter with you? Do you think I'm too old to work a drive?"

Brockman shook his head. "I want a good man at the Gap, that's all."

I knew the Murphy brothers and I didn't like them. And I was pretty sure they didn't care much for Brockman. Even so, however, I didn't see the sense in my mission. The Murphys were intelligent enough to know what would happen to them if they got in Brockman's way and wise enough to know that Brockman would help them get their own logs through the Gap if they let him through first. Just the same I located a horse and went on ahead. The next night I reached Devil's Gap.

The hills come together there and Crazy River cuts through a narrow rock gorge to the valley beyond. There have been some beautiful jams in Devil's Gap, for the channel is deep and the water fast and the rock is undercut on the inside. One of those beautiful jams was in the making the night that I got to Devil's Gap.

Huge timbers were already choking the narrow gorge and what looked like a million feet of fresh cut logs were riding down the last mile of the river to make the jam tighter.

I saw the Murphy chute to the river and saw several men working there, sending more logs into the water. I rode that way as fast as my tired horse would carry me.

The Murphys stopped work as I came up and both of them were grinning. That surprised me some. I could have taken on both of those fellows any morning before breakfast and they knew it. They knew who I worked for and probably what I meant to say. But still they kept on grinning even when I dismounted and yelled at the donkeyman to shut off his engine.

"What the hell's the idea?" I yelled. "Haven't you seen the jam at the Gap? Didn't you give Jim Brockman your word to keep out of the river until he had passed?"

The older of the two Murphys spat tobacco juice in the general direction of the chute. He said, "Don't jump me, Matt Price. I only work here. I'm not the boss of this outfit. I don't own them logs, thank God. The way they're pilin' up against the Gay they'll be there forever."

"You're not the boss?"

Murphy shook his head. "Nope. We're workin' for an outlander, some college kid who bought up our timber at a price a man would have been a fool not to take. And if he wants 'em jammed up at the Gap, that's his business."

I began to get it then.

"His name," said the elder Murphy, "is Tom Kinney. Maybe you've heard of him, huh? Maybe even Jim Brockman's heard of him. Here he comes now."

I turned around and saw Tom Kinney moving toward me. He was bearded and looked tired but there was a mocking expression in his eyes.

"So this is what you meant?" I said bluntly.

Kinney nodded, staring off toward the Gap. "Looks like a pretty tough jam, doesn't it. And I'm afraid it'll be tougher when Brockman's logs get here."

I started back toward my horse, then looked around at Kinney. "You'd better get out of here, Tom," I said slowly. "When Jim Brockman hears about this—"

Kinney laughed. "I warned him," he reminded me. "Let's see him get his logs down to the Big Muddy in time to meet his contract!"

I almost killed that horse on my ride back up Crazy River. There was only one thing I could see to do. We'd have to throw booms across the river at a dozen places and hold our own timber back until we could break that jam at Devil's Gap. When that was done a good many places where we had boomed our timber would have built up jams of their own, and all

the work ahead added up to a good many days, with time getting shorter. Things didn't look so good just then for Jim Brockman.

He took the news better than I expected, however, and we threw a dozen booms across the river and then lit out for the Gap.

BY THE time we got there the Murphys had gone and there wasn't anyone around but Tom Kinney. He was beyond the Gap, looking up at the jam, a mountain of piled up logs already holding back a lot of the water and creating an artificial lake beyond. And when Jim Brockman and a dozen of us moved up to where he was standing, Kinney didn't show any alarm at all.

"That timber's sure tied up, isn't it?" Tom Kinney said to Brockman. "Yep, that sure looks bad to me."

Brockman stared at the jam and then looked over at Kinney, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "What were you planning on doing?" he asked bluntly.

"Well, I've been studying that jam," Kinney answered. "I thought maybe if we could figure out just where the key log is that's holdin' up those others—"

"Key log, hell!" Brockman interrupted. "There's fifty logs holdin' up that jam. There's only one way to but it. Matt, get that dynamite?"

"Dynamite!" Kinney said sharply. "Oh, no. You're not going to blast my timber. We'll break this jam with peavies."

There wasn't a chance in the world of ever doing that and all of us knew it. Brockman's lips tightened. He said, "Matt, fix that dynamite. Four cannisters and a five-minute fuse."

Kinney backed off a little ways and drew a gun from his pocket. "I'll shoot the man who goes out on that log jam with any dynamite," he said bluntly.

Every man in our crowd stiffened. I looked up from fixing the dynamite and by their expressions I knew that Brockman only had to give the word and they'd rush Tom Kinney. Jules Duval was there and his look was dark with hate. The rest of the men were a well picked crew, too. None of them would have hesitated, in spite of Kinney's gun.

But Brockman said nothing. He didn't even act as though he had heard what Kinney had said. He was watching me fix the dynamite.

"I mean it," Kinney repeated. "That jam's going to be busted my way or not at all."

Brockman still didn't say anything but as soon as I had the dynamite ready he slung the cannisters over his shoulder and turned to face the jam.

"Where would you say we ought to blast, Matt?" he demanded.

I studied the jam for a minute, then pointed out a spot. Jim Brockman nodded. "I think you've got it. We'll try it there, first, anyhow. Maybe there's enough water piled up behind the Gap to clear it out if we get things moving."

Kinney's face was tight and strained. And when he spoke, his voice sounded high and unnatural. "Don't go out on that jam, Brockman."

So far as Jim Brockman was concerned, Tom Kinney might have still been in the States. Brockman didn't even look at him.

He moved to the edge of the river, jumped to a log and started making his way out to the jam. There was almost no current there and a good many logs had floated free. He didn't have much trouble getting out.

But I wasn't watching him and neither were any of the rest of the crew. We were watching Tom Kinney. There was perspiration on Kinney's face and his lips were a thin line. Three times, as Brockman headed for that jam, Tom Kinney raised his gun. And three times he lowered it. The last time he let it drop from his hands.

A shudder passed over him and his shoulders sagged. I had a notion that it was by quite a narrow margin that he hadn't fired. Then I saw Jules Duvall moving up to him and I saw Duvall's fist smash out. Kinney didn't even try to duck the blow before he went down, flat on his back.

I hated it, somehow. I hated to see Black Dan Kinney's son as beaten as he seemed just then, and I hated Duvall for hitting him.

I started for Duvall, then one of the men shouted and I stared toward the jam. Brockman had placed his dynamite and had touched off the fuse and was now hurrying away, climbing over the logs at the bottom of the jam. He was making good time.

What happened next might not have happened again in a thousand times and certainly not to Jim Brockman, for the man was as sure-footed as a cat. But just the same, he suddenly lost balance and went down, sprawled over one of the logs. For maybe ten seconds he lay there, then he seemed to be trying to get up but couldn't make it. It was clear to all of us that his foot was caught between two of the big timbers. He might as well have killed himself.

I heard gasps from the men near me, and I started for the river. Pat Hoke caught me and held me back.

"You'd never make it, Matt. You'd never make it," Pat said huskily. "Don't be a fool."

That was true and I knew it, and I knew also what was going to happen. In another two or three minutes, that dynamite charge would go off, and it was heavy enough to tear up a lot of those timbers. It might not bust the jam, but it would finish Jim Brockman. There wasn't any question of that.

I saw Jim struggling desperately to free himself but he couldn't make it. He didn't have anything to work with but his own hands, and the logs there were caught so tight that he couldn't move them. No one else could, either.

"My God, Matt! What can we do?" Pat Hoke breathed, his eyes horrified.

I shook my head. There wasn't anything we could do but hope that the dynamite wouldn't go off. I had fixed the caps and fuse, however, and knew there was no possibility of that. Then I heard Duvall scream something and I looked toward Brockman again. I could hardly believe what I saw.

Racing toward him across the logs was Tom Kinney!

How he got up after that blow of Duvall's and made it so fast to the river, I'll never know. He wasn't a riverman, yet he looked like one just then. He didn't falter once as he made his way to the jam and to the place where Brockman was trying so desperately to struggle free.

Even knowing what was going to happen I could feel a thrill in what young Tom Kinney was doing. He must have known that he didn't have a chance, for he had heard Brockman order a five-minute fuse, but I don't suppose he thought of that then. His father wouldn't have.

His father would just have gone out there as his son was doing.

Kinney reached Brockman's side and bent over him and I couldn't see what the two men were doing. For seconds they seemed almost motionless and then Tom Kinney was standing erect and was lifting Brockman to his shoulders and I saw that one of Brockman's boots was off.

They turned toward the shore.

It isn't easy to balance a two-hundred-pound body on your shoulders and climb over logs, and Kinney seemed to be moving awfully slowly. So slowly, that I shouted. I couldn't help it. When I started for the river I remember praying that the explosion would hold back just another minute—even half a minute would help.

I had taken maybe a dozen steps when the blast went off and I stopped and stared toward the jam. In the splintering timbers and white spray of water I thought that I saw the figures of the two men.

Then the concussion of the blast hit me and knocked me flat. . . .

WE PULLED them out almost a mile down stream, and most of the credit for that goes to Jules Duvall, for it was Duvall who sighted them, plunged in the river and got them and hung on until the rest of us could reach him.

At first it seemed like both of them were dead, but men like Brockman and Kinney take a lot of killing. They were badly battered up, but in less than an hour they had snapped out of it, and were able to sit up and talk.

Brockman started things by telling Kinney he had discovered that George Griggs, his attorney, had lied to him about buy-

ing out Black Dan Kinney's interest in the Triangle.

"So half of it's mine," Tom Kinney grunted.

Brockman nodded. "If we get it down to the Big Muddy."

"We'll get it there, said Kinney.

I felt pretty good. I had a notion it was going to be Brockman and Kinney again in the north woods and I knew that a combination like that couldn't be beat.

Brockman and Kinney went on talking, and pretty soon their voices raised, then they were shouting at each other. After a minute, Tom Kinney got up and limped off, and I moved back to where Brockman was sitting. His face was flushed with anger.

"Can you beat that, Matt," he yelled to me. "Tom Kinney thinks I'm gonna pay him for the timber I splintered when I set off that dynamite. He's just like his old man! He's—"

"What did you want of him?"

"I told him he'd have to pay *me* for the delay his jam caused. An' by God, he will!"

I couldn't hide a grin. "Is he throwing in with you after the drive?" I asked, trying to keep a straight face.

"Throwing in with *me?*" Brockman roared. "Hell, no! I wouldn't have him. Why, the young punk thinks he can run me out of the country. Me—Jim Brockman! I'll smash him if it's the last thing I do. . . . What are you grinning at?"

I said, "Nothing, Jim." But I went on grinning.

And after a minute, Jim Brockman grinned, too. "I told you, Matt, it would be like old times. That kid's a fighter. And he doesn't hate me since we've talked things over. I think he might even have joined up with me, but deep down he wants to run his own crew, just like old Black Dan did. You know, things are going to be mighty interesting up here from now on!"

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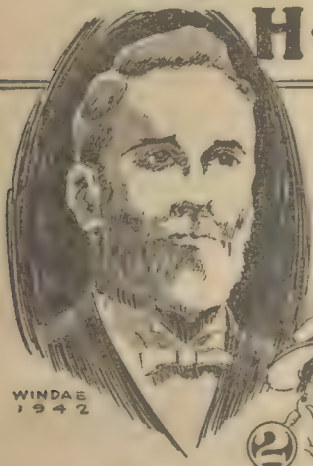
FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

H·CLAY·PLEASANTS



1

When bloodlust and lawlessness stalked unashamed through the hills and valleys of De Witt County, Texas; when the Taylors and the Suttons called their kinsmen to settle their bitter feud by Winchester and Colt; it was in those dark days there arose a champion of Justice and Peace who (almost single handed) brought order out of chaos. That champion was H.Clay Pleasants judge of the District Court in the town of Clinton.

2

Billy Taylor with his brothers and fifty armed cowboys were in battle array around the courthouse of Clinton, when James and William Sutton with half a hundred henchmen rode sullenly into town seeking to avenge the bushwhacking of a comrade. With unbelievable audacity, Judge Pleasants armed with a shotgun, strode between the belligerents; dared either side to fire a shot; bullied both factions into leaving town.

3

Again the fightingmen assembled, both sides willing and eager to exact vengeance for the loss of kin slain from ambush. This time it was in Cuero... and once again Judge Pleasants talked them out of it. Then Bill Sutton and Gabe Slaughter were murdered and general violence flared anew. Jim Taylor and two friends were killed in reprisal. The judge again intervened and for a time stopped further killings.

4

Then Doctor Brazell and his son were dragged from their beds and blasted into Eternity. The killers were recognised and warrants issued for their arrest. Judge Pleasants was warned he would be shot if he refused to grant bail for the prisoners. Bravely he sat his bench with loaded pistols in his hands, and committed the culprits to stand trial. His courage won the day, and when he further flaunted both clans by bringing Texas Rangers to tame them, he broke the vicious spirit of the feud. So peace came to De Witt County through the unflinching loyalty and devotion of this gallant frontiersman.

By DANE GREGORY

The coyote sprang again . . . like a splinter of light at her throat. . . .

Pride of the Fighting O'Malleys

How could Dan O'Malley, poverty rancher, buckle on his gun and ride against Shedd's invading woolly horde, when Dan's wife and baby needed him alive and well?

NETTA had put the new baby in the new crib when O'Malley pounded into the ranch house with a sack of flour across either shoulder. The baby had wailed incessantly throughout that forty-mile jog in the long-reach wagon; but she was fast asleep now under the handmade lace coverlet O'Malley's aunt had sent from Cork.

Netta bent low over the crib, her hair a patch of light against the cool, dark shadows.

She said brightly, "Isn't it wonderful to be home again, Dan?"

He shed the sacked flour with one great surge of his shoulders. Looking at her, he remembered the long days and nights when it had seemed she would never be home again; and that memory gentled his face so that the fury was gone like a cloud. "It would seem an empty house," O'Malley said softly, "without you, Netta."

"The baby," said Netta with that same false vivacity. "Isn't the baby beautiful, Dan?"

O'Malley looked down at the new O'Malley, still a little too small, red and wrinkled to be a comprehensible fact. He agreed reverently that the baby was beautiful.

"But you'd best lie down and take things easy now, Netta. I'll make supper when I get back."

Instantly the brightness fell away from her and there was panic in her eyes. "You're riding somewhere, Dan?"

He nodded.

"Dan," said Netta. "Dan! Are you going to—"

O'Malley took off his gun-belt and looped it over one of the rawhide-bottom chairs. "No, Netta," he said slowly. "I'll make no trouble for anyone today. I only want to look at the trouble that's been made for me."

He knew by the pulse beat in her throat how great her fear had been.

She smoothed the coverlet over the baby and said uncertainly: "We'll get by somehow, Dan. And—well, a man who rides away without his shell-belt usually rides back to his family."

"That's true enough," agreed O'Malley, "and no man alive ever had two better reasons for riding back." He rucked up the collar of his worn range-jacket and went out into the thin, cruel day.

Trying not to think, O'Malley turned one of the parrot-mouthed grays into the barn and cinched his old center-fire saddle around the reluctant bones of the other.

He said, "Sorry, girl," and swung astride the gray and heeled her gently past the lodgepole corral and the empty bunkhouse. There were saddle horses in the O'M remuda—several of them younger than twelve years old—but O'Malley had let them out of the corral when he drove into town with Netta.

That had been a month before: and there were many things that could happen to a man's world in the span of a month. O'Malley drew rein in the south pasture and looked about him with the dark taste of hate in his mouth.

These were his acres, sweeping away in broken beauty to the crayon shadows of Horse Heaven. They were the sum of his father's years and his own, and O'Malley loved them as any proud man loves the symbol of his pride and name. If anything, they were dearer to him now than ever they had been in those prosperous times when the grass licked at a man's stirrups and the bunkhouse sheltered sixteen riders.

O'Malley remembered the potato famine in Ireland and the times when his mother had clung fiercely to him as if her starved body could give its last strength to his. So O'Malley had nurtured this gaunt range, loving it the more for its gauntness. Blackleg had followed the big dry, and when the grass grew high again there had been no cattle on O'Malley's range. But O'Malley had run cattle for all of that.

He had run big-jaws and cripples, old cows and aged bulls—the scum of other men's herds. He had bought them for a whistle and marketed them for hard cash when his patient care paid dividends in the form of tallow. Some of his neighbors laughed at him; and laughing, fed their own independence away into Roy Shedd's bank. Proud in their humbleness, O'Malley and his range had survived intact.

But there were things they could neither fight nor survive, and this was one of them.

THE invasion had been slow and stealthy at the outset. Over the high wall of the Horse Heavens that ghostly army had sifted, polluting

tinajas and cutting the bench grass down to its roots and carrying loco weed into country where none had grown before.

Slowly at first and then like a gray, devouring tide, the hordes of sheep had come, irresistible because men had fed their independence away into Roy Shedd's bank. So he owned the men; and he owned the sheep as well.

"Range lice," said Dan O'Malley, and swore a great oath.

The woolies had looted and gone like a vagrant blight. O'Malley's line fences were down, tufted with defiant little flags of wool. O'Malley's south pasture was dust, and that meant he would have to buy hay for some of his culls. Under the surface of the situation there were broader meanings. O'Malley read them and his helpless fury smoked like a peat-fire in his eyes.

It was the end of him.

He alone had been vocal in his opinion of Shedd's bleating army, and he knew that the banker had seen in him an enemy around whom the opposition of a whole range might crystalize. This was the test. Shedd had thrown down the gauntlet at a time when he could not pick it up: and O'Malley's men-children would inherit no proud acres from their sire.

Probably, thought O'Malley, they would wear flat-crowned hats and eat wild onions.

He swung the gray and rode slowly back toward the ranchyard, sitting heavily in his saddle, and riding like the two men who now rode down into the cienaga to meet him.

O'Malley knew them well. They were riders for old Tullius Queen's neighboring Hammerclaw outfit; and both of them wore that slack, stupefied look he had lately seen on many faces.

They said, "Howdy."

O'Malley nodded and drew rein. "If you're looking for strays," he told them dourly, "you've come to the wrong part of my range. Sheep don't leave anything that would be likely to tempt a cow."

"Heard about that," said Curly Sloane. He looked at his cigarette rather than O'Malley, but a sudden bright expectancy took the slack out of his face. "Heard Shedd waited until your wife was sick and then had some of his Basques start sheeping you out. Kind of wondered how you'd like that, Shorty and me."

"Which is why we're here," said Shorty McCool. "We ain't looking for strays, Dan. We're looking for a job."

O'Malley pondering this. "Is it likely I could afford to take on riders now?"

Sloane's face loosened again and he sagged low in his saddle. "I guess not, Dan. Thing is, we didn't expect riding wages. What we wanted was fighting wages, and that don't mean the Johnson County scale. On account of we were brought up in this country, we'd have hired out for slabside and."

O'Malley understood. Expecting leadership from him, they would have committed themselves to that leadership even though neither had any personal stake in the mesa. They had no wives or children, either, O'Malley reflected; but despite the thought, his shamed ears burned the brim of his hat.

McCool said, "I ain't bigoted about sheepmen—I can shoot 'em or let 'em alone. But it was a little handful of cowmen like your old man that fought Indians for this strip of country and made it safe to live in. Plain justice says it ain't legal for one sheepman to come in and founder the whole country, now that it's safe."

O'Malley said, "How about Tullius? Is he going to—"

"Tullius owes the bank money, and the bank is going to call his loans unless he cuts down his beef herd and runs sheep like some of the other ranchers. Shedd will sell him the sheep, of course." Shorty McCool spat into the dust. "Seems like maybe you'll be in the wool business yourself before long."

O'Malley looked down at his white-knuckled hands.

"Unless something happens to Shedd and the two-three gunmen on his payroll," hinted Shorty McCool.

O'Malley lifted his eyes. Northward he looked to the tall smoke of home, the emblem for which men sometimes took up their guns and sometimes laid them down.

"I'm a family man," said O'Malley.

"So was Dion O'Malley when he forted up behind that chimney and shot five Indians. . . . Ah, come on, Curly."

They rode one way and O'Malley set

his face toward the smoke of home.

THE baby grew more and wept less. She had produced a wisp of hair by now—enough of it so that O'Malley knew she would have hair like her mother's when she had hair. Netta O'Malley watched over the crib.

These were the vital things of life, thought O'Malley, and against them a man's pride was as mist against rock. He rode the fence and repaired the ravages of Roy Shedd's herders, beating down the fierce strength within him when he surveyed the ravages that only nature could repair.

He had counted on that rich south pasture for some of the poorer culls. There were no two ways about it, O'Malley told Netta; he would have to buy hay before long.

She looked at him in quick alarm.

"I'll leave my gun-belt at home," sighed O'Malley.

He saddled up and rode into Soleil as the sun heeled over on its afternoon shift.

Midway down the dusty main street, Roy Shedd's sumptuous new saloon nudged the solid dignity of Roy Shedd's bank. And between the two slouched Shedd's city marshal, a lank and passive man.

"G'afternoon, Dan," said Marshal Bliss.

"Bah."

"Huh?"

"Well, *ba-a-a* then," said O'Malley. "I was just trying to say howdy with a Southern accent."

He shouldered past the marshal and trudged stiffly up the outside stairway that led to Roy Shedd's office above the bank.

That Shedd had been expecting this call was as evident to O'Malley as the four guns that hung on the two gunmen in his office. Men known locally as Grisson and Lord, they were equipped with the tight-wire muscles and flat, uncaring faces of their kind.

Comfortably settled between these two, Roy Shedd sat at his desk and gave O'Malley a mellow smile. "Why, howdy, Dan. What brings you to town?"

"Sheep."

"Sheep?"

"The ones that ate up my south pasture."

"Oh . . . that!" said Roy Shedd. The facile smile put a small shelf of fat under his eyes. "Well, I heard about that, of course. Have to apologize for my men, I guess—some of them are a little careless about fences."

"Never knew a herder that wasn't."

Shedd sighed faintly. "I know how you feel about sheep, Dan. But a man ought to grow with the country, and his whole country is turning to sheep. There's a quick, clean profit in 'em—and sheep can graze where cattle have been."

"But cattle," said O'Malley, "can't graze where sheep have been. For a handful of quick dollars, Shedd, you're ruining the whole mesa."

The banker sighed again. "Matter of opinion, that's all. Suppose we get down to business, Dan. You've come here to put in a claim for damages, I take it."

"Yeah."

"You know, of course, that it would be at least a year before a claim like that could pass through the courts?"

O'Malley's face hardened. The banker smiled again.

"Now wait, Dan. I know you need money for hay, and I'm prepared to do the right thing. Sit down."

O'Malley sat down.

"I'm going to make you a liberal proposition, Dan—very liberal, indeed."

Shedd took two squares of parchment from a drawer and spread them on the roll-top, looking benignly at O'Malley. "One of these is a quit-claim releasing me from all damages. You'll sign that. The other is a deed to the sheep that spoiled your graze—the stipulation being that you have to hire your own herders and move them off my property within a week. You understand?"

O'Malley's brain slowly digested the words. "Sheep?" he said in a dry, unbelieving voice. "Sheep? You're trying to give me a flock of your wet-nosed—"

"You can run them on your grazed-over range. Now wait a minute, Dan— I haven't quite finished. On the security of those sheep, I'll loan you enough money to buy hay for the cattle that need it." Shedd smiled amiably. "That sort of protects the sheep, you see. It's a pen-

itentiary offense to kill mortgaged property."

Dan O'Malley came to his feet. The urgency of his anger laid a terrible tension upon him, and there was quickening interest in the eyes of Grisson and Lord.

"I'm to be the bell-wether, am I? You're not only asking me to sell out the O'M—you want me to sell out my neighbors, too!"

"Now, Dan. . . ."

O'Malley said, "You planned it, Shedd. I'm the one man that's had a word to say against sheep, and if I run sheep on my range the whole country will give up. You knew that, didn't you? That's why you had your Basques cut my fence-wire."

Shedd's smile retired into snug, unbreakable calm. "You can take my proposition or leave it, of course, but from where I sit it looks to me like you haven't got much choice. Your cows will starve unless you have hay, and you'll have no hay unless you run sheep. That's final. I wouldn't be interested in a first mortgage on your big-jaws."

O'Malley's shaggy head sank down between his shoulders so that he had the look of a hot-blood horse gigged to its knees. "I put my last cent into those cattle, and I've got a wife and baby to think of now. You sort of figured on that, didn't you?"

"Every good banker takes a personal interest in the welfare of his clients," Shedd remarked affably. "Just sign here, Dan. I think you're going to make a mighty fine sheepman."

FROM the cottonwood motte that sheltered the ranch house, chimney-smoke raised its thin blue spindle against the darker blue of the horizon. O'Malley drew rein on the wagon-road and looked once again to that tall smoke, weighing his loyalties one against the other and yielding himself to the greater loyalty.

There was a black unrest upon him, a sense of self-betrayal that fenced him in to the exclusion of other things. It was a long moment before the pony's flat ears conveyed any meaning to him. He heard the cry then.

"Netta," whispered O'Malley.

The cry came again, and with it terror shut his throat like a hand. O'Malley drove his spurs deep into the pony's flanks and went at a killing gallop downslope.

"Netta!" he whispered again.

She stood in the bare, flat yard beyond the cottonwoods, her hair shaken loose so that it made a dusty fire around her.

She was very pale, and she had armed herself with a frail length of pine, and as O'Malley pounded along the patio she brought it down in a sweeping stroke.

It was not enough.

The coyote went backward in a tawny little ball and then came to its feet again. It looked up at Netta O'Malley and gathered its wiry muscles close to the ground, red tongue lolling through a gray crust of froth. It was terrible as only a coyote can be when it loses all fear of man. And O'Malley knew there was only one thing that could rob a coyote of fear.

He would not get there in time. Not by at least a dozen yards would he get there in time. "Netta, Netta!" O'Malley shouted above the purr of hoofbeats. "The nose! Hit it on the nose!"

The coyote sprang again, the wicked small body shooting like a splinter of light at her throat.

Netta swayed backward and let fly with her puny cudgel. It shattered to matchsticks on the coyote's pointed nose; and the coyote dropped stonily, turned over once and then lay stunned and passive in the dust. Only a blow to the nose would have done it.

O'Malley was out of saddle by then, heaving like his mount. He caught up a twelve-pound slab of rock and battered the coyote's head into the dust.

"Netta! It didn't—"

"No, Dan. It—it was terrible, Dan. I *couldn't* kill it! I kept hitting it and it kept coming back. I—"

"It was a rabid one, Netta. They come to ranch houses looking for water they can't drink, and they're ready to attack anything alive."

"I know." She teetered slowly.

O'Malley sheltered her with his strength. "Don't look at it, Netta. Into the house with you now, and take one deep snort from the bottle in the cupboard.

Netta went to the house. O'Malley stabled his cat-stepping pony and then got a spade from the shed. He buried the

coyote in a deep trough west of the barn.

The thoughts had tugged themselves into a clean, hard pattern when he spanked the sod level once more and went up to the house. "Now then, Netta," O'Malley said. "I want to hear how it was."

Netta bent over the baby's crib, color back in her cheeks. "I'd gone to the shed for a stick of firewood. I came out and saw it crossing the yard, and I— Oh, you know how it was."

"From the way the tracks were," O'Malley said, "I thought it was something like that. It didn't attack you first. You attacked it."

"Yes."

"Why? You were yards away. You could have shut yourself up in the shed and been snug as a bug."

"I—well, I thought of the baby. I—"

"But the house," O'Malley said gently, "was closed. There wasn't a chance in the world for the coyote to get in at the baby. Other babies, maybe, but not ours. . . . You weren't really thinking at all, were you, Netta? You didn't say to yourself: 'I have no right to do this— Dan and the baby need me.' "

"Dan! Are you trying to tell me I did a foolish thing?"

"A foolish thing, surely," O'Malley said. "A brave thing as surely, Netta O'Malley, and the only thing for an O'Malley to do. . . . It was a danger to others, and it needed destroying. You went out with your toothpick to wage a fight."

He took his gunbelt from the shelf and cinched it around his middle. That was better. The Colt made a friendly drag at his hip, anchoring him to a way of life he understood.

Netta had turned quite still, her face very pale.

She whispered, "It's not the same thing, Dan. People—people make all sorts of parables when they're trying to prove a point, but— People are *people,* Dan! They aren't coyotes."

"They are when they want to be," O'Malley said equably.

"But if anything should—"

"If anything happens to me, Netta, the place can be sold for enough to take care of you and the baby. . . . I'll try to be home tomorrow evening, but—well, it might be best not to wait supper."

"Dan, Dan!"

O'Malley said, "A life worth the having is worth the holding, Netta O'Malley. Will you kiss me good-by?"

She came over to O'Malley then and looked up at him through the shine of her tears.

"No," she told him. "No. But I'll kiss you, Dan."

"HELL WITH THE LID OFF!"

That's what young Lain Benbow stepped into when he answered the frantic, desperate SOS from the wife of his murdered cowman friend. . . . For one of the bitterest, bloodiest wars in the history of the range was about to bust wide open in the Panhandle, and Lain Benbow found himself elected to fill a waiting bushwhack grave!

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THICK and yellow, the dust boiled up against mid-afternoon and took the shape of a giant tumbleweed rolling on a lazy wind. But there was no wind.

Behind the dust cloud, prodding it along between the strands of barbed wire that followed the road, were three cross-bred dogs and three dead-beat men. In the dust cloud itself were sheep.

The cross-breeds had been leased from one of Shedd's Basque herders who had guaranteed that they would pilot a herd through a needle's eye if occasion arose. It was obvious to the herders that they understood sheep. The herders did not, though they wore flat hats and carried ewe-hooks as a gesture to the proprieties.

They were Sloane, McCool and Dan O'Malley; and behind them, men on horseback beat up a slow dust of their own.

They had come from afar to see this sight, roused by a puncher who had seen it at sunup and had rustled the leaves ahead. They were one-time cattlemen who slouched low in their saddles, themselves reconstructed by Roy Shedd so that they took a kind of dismal joy in another man's reconstruction. Dan O'Malley was herding sheep; and O'Malley had been the last rebel.

A round dozen of them had gathered back there when O'Malley's herd brawled downslope at last, undulating into the narrow wash where the town of Soleil slept like a man in a hammock.

The town came slowly to life.

Roy Shedd's face flattened itself against the office window above the bank.

Harve Whelan emerged from his general store with a Navajo blanket across one arm. He spread it carefully on the stoop and sat down to have his look.

The door of Bigler's Barber Shop squeaked and Marshal Tom Bliss came out into the street, one side of him lathered and the other scraped blue so that now he looked like a ewe shorn by a practical joker. He circled the left wing of the herd and pottered over to see O'Malley.

O'Malley said, "I'd get back, Tom."

Bliss looked at the man under the dust and said feverishly, "You hadn't ought to run sheep through town, Dan. You want to move your herd, you could—"

A hard smile cracked the relief map that was O'Malley's face. "They're my sheep, Tom. I've got a deed to 'em."

"But, Dan—"

"And a man can run his sheep anywhere he wants to," O'Malley said unequivocally. "Shedd does it, don't he? Well, that's what lawyers call a precedent."

"Dan, you ain't planning to—?"

O'Malley put down his ewe-hook and palmed the grip of his Colt. "I'd get back," he repeated gently. "You'll look like a cow again when this is cow-country, Tom, and I've always sort of had a liking for cows."

Marshal Tom Bliss went back to Bigler's Barber Shop.

O'Malley balanced his Colt and laid one shot across the milling sheep. It tore a hinge from the swing-door of Roy Shedd's sumptuous new saloon; and O'Malley put his second shot in the second hinge.

Harve Whelan folded up his Indian blanket and went back into his store.

Pale with outrage, the barman's face appeared in the aperture and then was lost in shadow. Shortly thereafter an alley door banged and the barman came out. He trotted down the alley.

It was a long moment before either the dogs or the sheep understood what was expected of them. Understanding at last, they cut scissorwise into the herd and began to stampede sheep through the door of Roy Shedd's new saloon.

Tables and glassware made a great racket in there, and across that sound a Winchester threw its long whine. . . .

O'Malley looked down at the dead ewe and up at the rifle barrel. The flat face of Joe Grisson, Shedd's gunman, regarded him from the window, one-eyed against the glare of the sun.

"Herd sheep!" O'Malley shouted at Sloane and McCool. "It's my fight!"

Grisson's second bullet plucked at his shirt pocket so that Bull Durham ran out of him like sawdust out of a doll. O'Malley sank to one knee and shot, aiming precisely rather than fast.

Joe Grisson's face went away from the window.

Rebounding against some unseen obstacle, he came forward again and leaned

across the sill and then spilled out onto the overhang of the building. Casual as only a dead man can be, he rolled downslope into the herd of sheep.

The dogs still barked. The woollies still funneled through the door of Roy Shedd's saloon. Above that tumult, hoofbeats made a quickening throb and someone's voice rose in unbridled joy.

They had needed nothing more than this, O'Malley saw. Sometimes a single brash gesture had the power to lift men out of themselves so that they were ready to renounce all other things for a share in that gesture. Unreconstructed at a stroke, Shedd's reconstructed cowmen were hammering down-street to help O'Malley herd sheep.

O'Malley himself cut around the flank of the herd and went south. He went up the outside stairway that led to Shedd's office above the bank; and the Shedd gunman named Lord came down the stairway.

Lord shot from hip-level and shot fast.

His first bullet tore the flat hat from O'Malley's head and laid a bright band of pain down O'Malley's skull. His second and third went wild.

There was no fourth.

O'Malley came up out of his crouch and shook the blood from his eyes. He stepped over the gunman's flat, uncaring face and into Shedd's private office.

The banker was nervously clipping shells into the chambers of a blue .44. The gun made a startled clatter on his desk as he looked up.

"Dan. . . ."

"Pick up your gun," O'Malley said, "and shove it into the waistband of your pants. You and me, we're going downstairs."

THE sheep splayed out around them so that they stood in a little island of quiet surrounded by noise. O'Malley put his gun back in holster and folded his arms across his breast. Seeing them there, other men came through the herd to bunch themselves nearby.

O'Malley said, "I wanted everyone to know it was a fair fight, Shedd. You're heeled and I'm heeled. Let's be about it."

Shedd's face shattered with anguish. "I only wanted to do what I thought was best for the country! If I'm in the minority—"

"You will shortly be," said O'Malley, "a minority of none."

"No, Dan. No! I'll buy the sheep back. I'll—"

O'Malley considered this. "From everyone?" he said softly.

An instant enthusiasm came to Roy Shedd. "From everyone, Dan!"

"You will remember," said O'Malley, "that cows are good enough security for any cow-country banker?"

"Naturally. Naturally, Dan. I only thought—"

"And that I'll shoot you on sight if you go back on your word?"

The banker laughed a high, ecstatic laugh. "No danger of that, Dan."

The town adjusted itself to an old way of life. Cattlemen's shoulders drew straight again, and Marshal Tom Bliss came out of the barber shop.

It had taken little enough effort, thought O'Malley: but great or small, the price of holding would always be less than the pride of having.

"So let's seal the bargain with a drink!" Shedd cried deliriously. "They're on me, folks! We'll go into my saloon, and—"

His glance veered sideways and he paled again. The dogs were still herding sheep.

Someone in the crowd said quietly, "I guess you had a pasture there, Roy, but that was before O'Malley cut your fence-wire."

* * *

Her eyes were soft in the smoky light. She said, "We're having chowchow."

O'Malley hung up his gunbelt. "You should learn to be more frugal, girl," he said sternly. "I told you it might be best to make supper for only one."

"I knew you'd be home, Dan. After an O'Malley has won his fight, he does not strut around town preening himself like a cock o' the walk."

O'Malley drew her close to him and whispered against her hair. "Ah, Netta," he said. "Netta. . . . I'm a proud family man this evening."

"The O'Malleys are a proud family," said Netta O'Malley.

WILD ONE!

An Epic Novelette of the Wild Horse Country

To young Brant Logan, capture and sale of that glorious buckskin stallion meant freedom for his prison-framed brother. To Brant's hard-bitten pardner the death of that wild monarch meant vengeance against the horse that long ago, had made him a twisted, embittered cripple. But to the hard-pressed ranchers of the Hunchback Range, that majestic wildling might bring release from the slavery of a ruthless land-hog combine.

By
ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

CHAPTER ONE

Horse-Hater!

YOUNG BRANT LOGAN caught the flash of movement in one of the rock-ribbed gullies leading out of the badlands, and his heart began to hammer. He had seen that tawny coat before, had seen it flash like that in the sun.

He lay on his belly among the rocks which were crisping him the way a skillet fries bacon. It didn't matter. Nothing

Burning sun, torturing thirst . . . nothing mattered if it meant getting close to that lion-coated stallion. . . .

mattered if it meant getting close to the big lion-colored stallion. Twice in his sixteen-year-old life Brant Logan had been within a stone's throw of him, and each of those occasions stood out in his mind like a diamond set in black marble.

He listened hard for the clatter of unshod hoofs, but the thunder of the river behind him was too strong.

Brant turned his head to grin at the weary gray pony. His cheeks were dark with freckles and dirty with the sweat and dust of much riding.

"Rockstro done it," he said. "Kep' pushing those mustangs away from water till there was no place for 'em to go but

back through Red Rock Pass to the river. The rest of it's up to us."

The wise old gray—Jim Logan's horse—jerked his head. Some folks would have said he was just tossing at a fly, but Brant knew blamed well he was nodding because he was a smart horse.

The boy's throat grew a little dryer than it already was when he thought about his brother Jim, in the Saddlefork jail, charged with horse stealing. For two hundred dollars, Lawyer Rance Goodyear had said, he could maybe get Jim out. The lion-colored stallion, if he could be roped and broken, would bring that and more.

Again Brant Logan got a glimpse of the mustangs—almost a score of them forming a moving pattern against a sheer canyon wall. They were running, but not strongly. Manes were caked and heavy with sweat; heads swung low. They had been on the move for almost a week.

Carefully the boy got to his knees. And as always when he saw the wild ones running free, he was conscious of that queer tightness in his chest.

The gray's ears pricked forward. His breathing was thin from exhaustion, but he was ready again. He would keep on being ready until he dropped.

Brant Logan crawled into the saddle. Without command the wiry gray tackled the steep slope, treacherous with loose rock, which led down to the river.

Bordering the stream was a section of rolling flatland dotted with willows. His dark eyes bright with eagerness, the boy checked again the plan that he and Jim and Rockstro had laid with such infinite care.

The canyon the mustangs were following would spill them out onto the flat. When that happened there would be a precise moment in which to turn them up river into the trap. A miscalculation of no more than seconds would allow them to wheel back the way they had come, or swing down-river into the freedom of the country they knew so well.

Choice of that moment required a keen and wary judgment. Jim Logan could have put his finger on it with needle-point exactness. But he wasn't here.

The mustangs were now sweeping down from the mouth of the canyon. There was a whistle from the stallion, and the bay mare running in the lead stopped short. The other mares and the colts bunched behind her, standing frozen while the stallion went ahead to reconnoiter.

The wild one's coat was ragged, plastered with dirt, rimed with sweat and foam flung back from thirsty jaws. Scars of battle broke the sweep of tawny hide from shoulder to flank. Long running without feed, water or rest had flared out his nostrils, gaunted him down, put burning fury into his eyes.

But to the boy lying hidden in the willows he was a thing of utmost beauty. He was big—oh, he was big! There was grace in the way he paced the flat, searching for danger. In the carriage of his head, the pricking of his ears, in the way he tossed up his nostrils, was a terrible majesty.

The boy, watching him, almost sobbed.

Back and forth the stallion trotted, smelling the wind, his blazing eyes ransacking each thicket, each hollow, each patch of tumbled rocks.

At a signal from the stallion the mares broke for the river, the stallion trotting ahead, still wary. Closer and closer he came until, topping a little ridge, he seemed to tower against the sky like a thing tawny and wild and free, leaping away from the earth.

There was a demon in Brant Logan that told him to spring to his feet, shouting. But he didn't. Instead he lay with his fingers digging into the sod, waiting.

He had stopped breathing altogether. He felt sullen pain growing in his lungs. The stallion hesitated, poised to wheel and fly. Brant Logan could hear the whoosh of breath in his nostrils. Then on he came. Another stride. Another.

The boy was on his feet, leaping. He hit the saddle without touching stirrups, and the little pony bolted into the open.

The stallion swung toward them with a scream that was both challenge and warning. So strong was the savage defiance in him that for an instant it seemed he would rush in to attack.

BRANT was shouting at the top of his lungs. His tattered hat flung about wildly in his hand. The lion-colored stallion, muscles bunching in a

flow of power, spun away from him. The band of mares crowded together, swung away, went flying in confusion.

The little gray pony fled along the slope to head them.

The stallion appeared to cover two lengths to the gray's one, but he had farther to go to regain the canyon's mouth. He came on, stretched out, mane and tail streaming.

Wind blocked the boy's nose. He could hear his own high-pitched yelling above the surging clamor of the mustang's hoofs. There was gaping emptiness in his belly because he thought he had guessed wrong; that the gray couldn't make it.

The gray, all gristle and grit, did make it. He was reaching with his forefeet and his out-thrust nose and he swung over, and the mustangs swerved. They cut sharply away from that small gray racer with the yelling demon on its back, and the only place left for them to run was into the trap.

It didn't look like a trap. It looked like a grass- and willow-carpeted gulch, a little narrow at the mouth perhaps, but widening and promising a way back to the broken fastnesses of the hills. There were a hundred and more gulches like it leading away from the river. Of them all, only this one pinched to an unscalable wedge.

In earlier days some homesteader had strung barbed wire across the opening. He had long ago gone broke; the fence had been torn up and thrown aside.

Into that gully the mustangs pounded.

Brant dropped out of the saddle. His legs were shaking, and he was so excited he wanted to keep right on yelling. He was trying to laugh with happiness, but he couldn't. He had to choke back tears because there was something about the sheer beauty of the stallion that made him want to cry.

Pitching into the job he had to do drove those mixed feelings away. He began to pile rocks across the narrow opening.

The bed of the gully dropped sharply away from the opening, which made jumping even a low barrier from inside impossible.

He worked on through most of the afternoon. Twice the mustangs came with a rush into the lower part of the gulch. The boy would stand up, shouting and waving his hat. The wild horses would wheel and retreat. . . .

It was late afternoon when Rockstro came riding down from Red Rock Pass.

There had been no better horse hunter in the hills until a half-crazed broomtail had caught him in the open and nearly killed him. His left arm was permanently bent at the elbow, and the little and fourth fingers of his left hand had withered into useles claws.

He was a burly man, and his jaws were so solidly set together it seemed that they would have to be pried apart before he could speak. He had been Jim's partner for the last three years. Most wild horse hunters turned taciturn, but there was something more than taciturnity about Rockstro. There was something that made Brant Logan a little afraid of him.

Though he knew Rockstro scorned useless talk, the boy had to speak or burst.

"He's in there, Rockstro!"

The hunter refused to turn his head. "Didn't build this wall 'cause you'd lost him, did you?"

"He's ours," the boy blurted, "an' he's goin' to get Jim out of jail. I talked to Goodyear. For two hundred dollars, he said, he'd take the case. He'll get Jim out."

"He won't get him out if he's guilty."

"Guilty!" The boy's freckles stood out as his thin cheeks whitened. "Jim didn't steal those horses!"

Rockstro spat, scowling. "They was in the mountain corral. An' Jim's gray was with 'em, still wet. That's what the sheriff found."

"They was put there to frame him!" Brant cried desperately. "How else did the sheriff know to walk in right then? If he was a square sheriff I'd say different. Only he ain't. He's sold out to Milt Dalby, an' between 'em they're tryin' to bust every little horse outfit in the hills!"

Rockstro stared straight ahead. "They've already busted 'em."

"They ain't busted us yet! They ain't goin' to, neither—not when we got that stallion. Jim said the outfit that had horses this fall would clean up with 'em."

Rockstro shrugged. "It's Lindskog and Dalby that'll clean up. The British got a war on their hands down in South Africa. They're buyin' up mounts."

"Army? I didn't know that. How'd you find out—?"

Rockstro scowled, as if something he hadn't meant to say had slipped out. "Forget it, kid."

There was a flurry of hoofbeats in the gulch, and the trapped mustangs trotted into sight. The stallion threw up his head and trumpeted defiantly. He rose and struck with his forefeet at the earth. It was such a blow that had maimed Rockstro.

The horse hunter leaned with his good arm against the barricade; there was a queer film over his eyes as he stared at the animal whose coat was almost golden in the slanting sunlight.

"Scar. That's your name— Scar," he said in a low voice. "If it's trouble you want, Scar, you're going to get it."

CHAPTER TWO

A Badland Fugitive Takes the Trail

BRANT LOGAN took some of the rocks out of the wall. Rockstro saddled Jim's gray pony and led him through. He had shed his coat and gun belt, and his shoulders looked like the butt-end of an anvil.

He rode up into the gulch, shaking out his loop, and presently the mustangs came thundering down into the wider end. Twice Rockstro had to go back after them. Four times he tried to corner Scar, only to have the big stallion out-maneuver him.

On the fifth throw the rope settled over the stallion's neck, the gray settled back, and Scar spilled over with a crash. He struggled there savagely, but the gray, backing against the rope, held him pinned until he went limp.

Brant Logan watched with his fists clenched and a hard lump clogging his throat. He had watched wild horses being broken before—it was the toughest, hardest game of them all—but this was different—because this time it was Scar.

Rockstro went down the rope and hogtied the stallion. Only then did he loosen the throttling noose. He left Scar thrashing helplessly as he strode back to the barricade for his own saddle.

The boy asked huskily, "You reckon he'll break, Rockstro?"

"He'll break," Rockstro said.

It took almost half an hour to get the saddle cinched down while Scar lay on his side, kicking out viciously, trying to reach Rockstro with his teeth.

Brant Logan climbed into the gray's saddle. If Rockstro got piled he was apt to need help in a hurry.

Rockstro notched his belt, jerked down his hat. When he snatched loose the thongs that held Scar down, the stallion erupted with a scream of mad rage. Rockstro came up astride him, got his stirrups and stayed in them. He wasn't making a show ride. He was fighting Scar as ruthlessly as he knew how.

Brant Logan had never seen a horse pitch the way Scar did. It wasn't straight bucking. The stallion was battling to the last notch, heedless of any danger, reckless of his own life, wanting only freedom.

He went up in back-breaking leaps, twisted, tore in every way he could at the fearful weight on his back.

He raced at one of the sheer, rocky walls of the gully, turned and hurled himself broadside against it. The shock knocked him back and off his feet. When he came up, gasping, clawing for breath, Rockstro was in the saddle again.

He went to pitching furiously, up and up, then back and down with wrenching deadliness. Rockstro had sprung clear like a cat; he was astride again, kicking for his stirrups. Rockstro's face was a blur of stubble and dirt and sweat and blood.

He wasn't riding Scar; he was fighting him. With his good right hand he beat the stallion over the head with a doubled length of rope, lashing him, blinding him, maddening him.

Brant Logan watching it, wanted to be sick. Something horrible was churning in his chest. That feeling swept over him like breaking surf.

He cried, "Quit it! Leave him alone, Rockstro! Quit hittin' him!"

He forgot about Jim and the jail in Saddlerock and the rest of it.

He was still shouting when Scar hit the barbed wire.

It lay in a heap off to one side—a tangle of rusted, broken strands and rotted posts. The stallion couldn't have known what it was. He went up and back in the middle of it, and one of the barbs, catching Rock-

stro's trouser leg, kept him from regaining the saddle.

Rockstro jumped clear, but he held to the end of the rope with which he had built the hackamore. Scar, up on his feet again, reared back to the full length of the rope. His forelegs were trapped, there were two strands looped around his croup, and the barbs were slashing him wickedly, but he reared away from Rockstro, the whites of his eyes showing.

Rockstro took a step toward him, and Scar began to plunge. Fresh streaks of red sprang out on the tawny hide.

Brant Logan spilled out of the gray's saddle. He croaked Rockstro's name, but Rockstro didn't turn his head. He took another step toward Scar, pulling at the rope, and Scar kept plunging. Those red streaks kept springing out against the tawny coat.

"He won't let you!" Brant screamed. "Can't you see it? He'll kill himself before he'll let you!"

Rockstro didn't seem to hear him. That film lay across the horse hunter's eyes. And in that instant Brant Logan understood that the older man hated horses. Not just Scar, but all horses. Because of his arm that was ruined.

He would break Scar his way, or kill him.

The boy caught at Rockstro's shoulder, but it was like trying to move a ledge of granite. Rockstro put his hard muscle against the rope again, and again Scar went to plunging.

Brant Logan half tripped against one of the forgotten posts, split and partly eaten away. He lifted it in his hands, lifted it above his head, and smashed at Rockstro with it.

The horse hunter went down and the rope slipped from his fingers, but he wasn't unconscious. He came up on his hands and knees, and the bitter fury in him turned to Brant Logan. Cold fear was knotting the boy's belly muscles, but he could still move. He ran back to the barrier and took the gun and belt which Rockstro had left there. The gun came up in his hand, and it was cocked.

"Get goin', mister. Take the gray for your pay. You an' me are finished." His voice had a queer, cracked note in it.

Rockstro stood up. "Drop that iron, damn you!" He was raging, but he was looking at a stronger passion.

"Get goin', I said! I'll kill you quicker'n you'd have killed Scar!"

For a long minute Rockstro stared back. Then he led the little gray gelding to the wall. He pulled out stones enough to get the horse through. He rode downriver along the flat without looking back.

THE gun fell out of the boy's fingers, and he looked at Scar. The stallion stood trembling in the tangle of wire. The wildness was still in his eyes,

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in his heaving flanks, in his flaring nostrils.

"Scar, boy," Brant Logan said softly, "you're comin' out of there. Easy, now. Sure it hurts. We'll get you out. Take it easy, old fellow."

Still talking, he began to walk, very slowly, toward the stallion.

He was crying, because he couldn't help seeing what the barbed wire had done, but he kept on talking too. It was dusk before the quivering Scar let him come within arm's length.

The keyed-up passion in the boy kept him there as it grew dark, talking, pleading, his voice running on in a reassuring whisper. And in the darkness he touched Scar's shoulder; he loosened the cinch around the belly that was cold with the sweat of panic; he twisted and bent the wire with its deadly fangs.

One moment the smell and the feel and the nearness of Scar was so strong it made the boy's head swim; the next he was gone, with the tangle of rusted wire rustling sullenly, and there was only emptiness where he had stood.

That thudding sound was Scar kicking loose the saddle which had turned under him. Then came the pound of his hoofs, running back up the gully.

The bones in Brant's legs went limp. He was scared, and there wasn't a bit of strength left in him. He went down on his knees, choking. His hands were slippery because of the damage the wire had done to Scar.

After a while he got up and found the saddle and carried it back outside the wall. Nothing to do now but wait until morning. He didn't know what he was going to do then.

He had tossed his bedroll into a cleft in the rocks. He got it out and crawled into the blanket. For a long time he lay watching the black sky, listening to the restless stirring of the trapped mustangs. They were thirsty, far thirstier than he was.

He couldn't get the memory of Scar out of his head. Scar caught in that wire, with the barbs tearing him to pieces. . . . The moon came sailing up over the black and ragged hills, and some of the thin pinnacles looked like the bars of a cell. That reminded him of Jim, waiting down there in Saddlefork. Jim with his big white teeth that were made to grin with. Jim with his sober gray eyes that never looked at anything without thinking about all the little corners.

"God never made a man that was fit to lord it over his neighbors," Jim had said. "An' he never made a man so poor he didn't deserve a square deal."

That was why Jim Logan had quit as Milt Dalby's foreman. Maybe the little outfits wouldn't have put up a fight if Jim Logan hadn't led them.

Dalby planned to extend his Crossed-Iron control to everything that lay between Rogue River and the Hunchback Mountains. Dalby had come pretty close already to making that boast stick. The little fellows had been burned out, rustled into bankruptcy, jockeyed into fights they couldn't win. Now, if Dalby could pin his horse thief charge on Jim Logan, the backbone of resistance would be broken. . . .

It must have been nearly dawn when Brant Logan came up, shivering, on one elbow. He didn't know whether he had slept or not. Faintly, dimmed by the rumble of the river, he had heard the ring of shod hoofs on rock. He listened, and then heard it again. Night visitors, in these times, could be dangerous.

The boy slid out of his blanket. Rockstro's gun and belt were beside him; he buckled them on and went like a prowling wolf through the willow clumps.

In the moonlight, presently he made out two riders coming up along the river. The shoulders of one he recognized immediately. And the flat, hoarse voice of the other was a trademark every man in the Saddlefork country knew. Words always came out of Sheriff Lindskog's throat as if they were scraping over stone.

"Attempted murder, wasn't it?" Lindskog said.

"Clubbed me," said Rockstro thickly. "Then threw down on me. He'd have shot, sure as hell."

"Better say he did shoot. We'll leave the gun dirty."

"All right. We hadn't better ride no closer. He's a sharp-eared young devil an' he's still got the gun."

The two men pulled in. They were lumpy black shapes dismounting in the moonlight. Brant Logan, hunched down

in the willows, felt his mouth go dry and rough as sandpaper.

"The stallion's mine," Rockstro said harshly. "Understand that. The stallion's mine."

"Thought he was tore to pieces in the wire?"

"Maybe he was an' maybe he wasn't. If he's alive I aim to finish what I started."

Brant Logan lifted himself to his knees. He wasn't scared any more, and he didn't feel as if he had water in his legs instead of bone. He knew what he was going to do. Rockstro wasn't going to get Scar. Lindskog wasn't, and Dalby wasn't.

Rockstro and the sheriff were coming at him cautiously in the moonlight. The boy lifted the revolver and aimed carefully.

The bullet skimmed within inches of Lindskog's face, hit a flat rock and screamed off in a ricochet. The explosion roared and slammed in the gullies.

Lindskog yelled, diving for a cluster of rocks. Brant's second bullet clipped Rockstro's sleeve. Cursing, the horse hunter sprang back.

The sheriff was roaring something to Brant about the law and surrender, and being combed out of his hiding place with lead. But Brant wasn't listening. He had moved fast and was running back toward the gully that held the mustangs.

He bent as low to the ground as he could get, and kept willow thickets between himself and the two men. He didn't know how much time he would have, but he guessed Lindskog would make mighty sure he was gone before moving out of his shelter.

He got back to the wall, and began to pull at the rocks, opening a hole. Down by the river a revolver roared three times. Lindskog was hoarsely promising more of the same if the Logan whelp didn't give himself up.

The hole was big enough. Panting, Brant Logan ran through and into the gully. The dark sides loomed on either hand. There was only a ragged strip of moonlit sky above him. He thought once about the risk he was taking, remembering Rockstro's arm, and then didn't think about it again.

The mustangs were huddled back where the gully narrowed to a wedge. It was too dark to see anything, but he could hear the nervous circling of the horses. Scar was somewhere among them. Scar!

Brant Logan wasn't aware that he had yelled or made any noise at all. He was as far into the gully as he dared to go, plastered flat against one of the walls. Suddenly the pound of hoofs was swelling wildly, booming at him, thundering past. He could have reached out and touched a sweat-caked flank.

The mustangs were storming down the gully, and he was running behind them. Down where the trap widened and a little light could filter in, he saw them again, heads tossing, bunched up by the gap in the wall.

They drained out through that gap. He looked for Scar, but Scar was lost in the confusion.

Rockstro knew what was happening. The horse hunter was cursing, sprinting up from the river, but he was too late. Scar was gone. Scar was free again. . . .

A horse couldn't scale one of the gully's sides, but a man with two hands could. It meant leaving his bedroll, saddle and Rockstro's horse, but Brant Logan knew that if there was an hour of darkness left, he would get all the start he needed into the badlands. Though he would be on foot, Rockstro and Lindskog could never catch him.

A look at the sky told the boy he was going to have his hour.

CHAPTER THREE

When Outlaws Meet

IT WAS late afternoon when Brant Logan limped up to the little cabin tucked away in the hills. He called out, and the door was opened by an old man who had his left hand on a Winchester leaning against the wall.

It was argued by some that Uncle Ben Gorst had got into the country ahead of the mountains; even if he hadn't, he gave every indication of outlasting them.

He said, "Howdy. Since when you taken up walkin'?"

"Since yesterday. I figgered maybe you could loan me a horse."

"Sure you wouldn't rather have a new

pair of boots, now you got the hang of it?" The old man grinned. "Come on in. I'm just eatin'."

Brant Logan tried not to let his face show what the smell of food was doing to his stomach. His last square meal had been a long way back on a tough trail.

When the brown beans and the canned corn and the biscuits were set in front of him, Brant Logan couldn't help tearing in like a snow-starved cougar.

"Seen Jim?" he asked.

Gorst nodded. "I was down there two days ago. Jim's frettin' some, but he ain't licked."

"He ain't goin' to be, Uncle Ben."

"Mebbe. He's got a notion there's money enough in wild horses to pull the little outfits through. Wants the boys to pitch in together on a round-up."

"Jim's right," Brant exclaimed. "They ain't all fuzztails by a long shot! There's a good sprinklin' of Scar's colts in the bunch, an' Scar's got real blood in him somewhere."

"Scar?"

"That's the name he'll have now, whether he wants it or not. Once you've seen him up close you don't want to lie down till you've got him for good. That's what I want a bronc for."

Uncle Ben Gorst nodded. He didn't ask about the rest of it, and because he didn't, Brant sketched out the events of the past week. He told Ben what Rockstro had said, the part that had seemed to slip out.

"That's South Africa," Ben said. "The Boer War. So the British Army is comin' after horses, is it?"

"Milt Dalby must have known about that. That's why he's tryin' to bust the little horse outfits an' take over their stock."

"Might be," Ben admitted. "Only ketchin' wild horses won't help the little spreads. The army won't take mares or colts—an' that's about all they'd get."

"If they can sell mares an' colts, an' get by," Brant pointed out, "they can save the stock they got now for the army."

Uncle Ben produced a stubby pipe. "It could work out that way. If Dalby don't find out an' crimp the deal. I'll talk to Les Baylor an' the Skagway boys. Sure you won't come along with us?"

Brant Logan shook his head. "It'll take you three-four days to get organized. I'll be in the hills. If I run into you there, we can throw in together."

He got the horse from Uncle Ben—a brick-colored roan. The roan was rougher to ride than a broken rocking chair, but he could travel like a goat in the high country.

The old man provided, also, a slab of bacon, coffee, three dozen hard biscuits, a sack of salt, and a considerable allotment of grain. He insisted that Brant take along his binoculars in their worn leather case.

Brant Logan got in nearly ten miles of riding before dark. He camped by a little spring which lay just below the notch of Red Rock Pass. Stretched out and relaxed, the weariness which had been building up in him slugged him like a fist.

He was thinking about Jim—figuring how Jim would look when he was told that Scar had brought the money Goodyear wanted—when he dropped off into solid sleep.

He was moving again before daylight, heading for the high bleak ridges of the Hunchback Mountains. He had reasoned it out. Scar was hurt, and he would instinctively make for a spot that he knew, a spot remote and difficult of access, a spot where, at some time or other, he had been safe.

That meant the Hunchbacks. Wild horses had run there ever since Brant could remember. It was bad country and wastes of rock, scrawny stands of timber anchored precariously in poor and shallow soil. Patches of thin grass and weeds in ill-favored ravines. That was the Hunchback range—a bold and ugly backbone, shapeless and untrustworthy.

A wounded animal might run there, if he had the strength for it, and know that he could live or die without the intrusion of man.

The wild horse bands roamed the rocky plateaus, found forage of a sort in the narrow gorges.

Scar would go there—if he was alive!

TWICE he found where the band had stopped to nibble hastily at patches of grass. He left the saddle to study the grass and the hoof-

chopped dust and the rock. In both places there were brown stains. He knew he was following a grim race between the stallion's life-blood and his great heart.

The broken outline of the Hunchbacks drew closer, and by late afternoon Brant was in the foothills.

Nothing seemed to move on the pile of sun-blasted stone. Somewhere in a maze of rocky washes he had lost the mustangs' trail.

The band hadn't been making the time it should. They were worn down, close to exhaustion. Still, that didn't account for it. The stallion had been too weak to press them, nip at the stragglers, force them along. . . .

Brant pulled in to let the roan blow. He climbed to a jutting knob of rock and sat there, sweeping the country with his glasses. Section by section he combed the tumbled ledges. There was no movement, nothing.

Brant swore. He could only go on blindly. The mustangs had already got away into the higher, invisible plateaus. The quickest way to reach them would be to climb along the ledges.

He put his foot in the roan's stirrup. He didn't mount, but kept it there, his head tilted back, staring into the hot sky.

He would have sworn that a moment ago there had been no black speck circling high above him. It was there now, wheeling in slow circles, its evil eyes watching death creep upon some live thing below it.

A coyote, perhaps. Or a wolf. Something that had crawled into the Hunchbacks to die.

Brant felt cold sweat run along his back. Not Scar. It couldn't be Scar!

Whatever it was the vulture watched lay to the north.

Brant headed the roan north. Unless he found what he was afraid he would find, a day would be lost.

The late sun boiled down, and for what seemed like hours it rested on the rim of the Hunchbacks, as if caught there. The roan toiled upward, sides heaving.

Brant Logan's jaw was like one of the rocks that surrounded them. He knew now that the mustangs had come this way. And he could guess why.

Tucked away in one of the bleak ravines was a spring. Jim had shown it to him. One-Drink Springs, it was called. During most of the year a man could get a drink for himself and his horse, but none for his canteen.

Deviled by thirst, the mustangs had made for it. There would be water for a few, churned mud in which the others could wet their muzzles.

The roan's hoofs crunched sluggishly along what must once have been a stream bed. Even with the sun gone, the surrounding rocks threw out an oven's heat. It turned Brant Logan's tongue into a swollen lump of lead; it made burning metal of his eyeballs; it made him see a phantom Scar—a Scar whirling like the wind ahead of him. . . .

He rubbed a sleeve fiercely across his eyes. The phantom stopped, poised on the brink of nothingness. It was a posture of flight, sculptured; in a moment the phantom would soar away.

And then Brant Logan knew that this was no phantom. Scar was there! The stallion stood at the edge of a drop-off, trembling, trying desperately to force himself to jump.

He had seen the rider coming out of the twilight. What he may have meant for a scream of defiance was like no sound the boy had ever heard.

Brant checked the roan, terror slamming through him. As he watched, Scar's legs buckled. He went down heavily on He was choking on his own cracked voice: "Scar! You ain't dyin'! Scar, you can't! *You can't!*"

* * *

Scar would probably have died during the night had it not been for the water Brant poured into his mouth. Brant had emptied his canteen, and then crawled on down to One-Drink Springs.

What had trapped the stallion was a break in the ancient water-course no more than six feet high. It would have been simple enough ordinarily, but Scar had been too weak to attempt it. The rest of the band had made the jump, gone on to the spring, and thence to the Hunchback plateaus. Scar had been left behind.

Sometime during the night Scar had got to his feet again. He stood with his

head swinging almost to the ground. The wild fire in him had turned to cold ashes. Of the animal who had reigned as monarch of the Hunchbacks there was left only a skeleton.

Brant threw off his bed-roll and unsaddled, shame-faced at having neglected it. There wasn't going to be water enough for the three of them. He himself had merely wet his lips since the previous afternoon. In his hat he gave the roan what little he figured he could spare, and started him back for Uncle Ben's with a slap on the rump.

He went toward Scar.

"It's you an' me, boy," he croaked. "If you don't make it, I don't either!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Monarch of the Hills

THAT first day passed like a terrible dream. The boy was stupid with fatigue, tortured by the ugly fear that Scar could not live.

When he looked at the festering slashes left by the barbed wire, when he heard the stallion's pitiful struggling for breath, he thought his heart would burst.

There was so much to be done. He dug out the spring. Every drop of water oozing up through the mud was like gold.

He boiled water with which to clean the open gashes in Scar's legs. His underwear—boiled, dried in the sun and torn into strips—served for bandages. Scar didn't move during that treatment.

Brant crawled out of the wash, hunting little crannies which held grass. This he gathered and brought back to the stallion. Scar nuzzled at it, but would not eat. Brant, remembering an old trick of Jim's, soaked the bag of salt and let it drip on the grass. Scar nibbled a few mouthfuls and accepted some grain treated in the same way.

It was water he wanted most. The boy touched not a drop himself.

Night came again, and it seemed that there had been no more than a brief hour of daylight. Brant Logan had not planned to sleep. He was bringing water from the spring; after climbing up over the drop-off he stretched out for an instant to rest. When he awoke the sun was above the ridges, lancing directly into his eyes.

He sprang up in dismay, but the dismay vanished. For the first time Scar appeared to see what he looked at. When the boy moved he tossed his head, gave the ghost of a snort, and took a few sidling steps away from him.

The boy grinned. He forgot his hunger, and the aching despair which had gripped him for two nights and a day.

Water was the thing. He got a full canteen of it. When Scar refused to let him approach, he poured the water into a hollow in the rocks. He sat away at a distance, talking softly, while Scar smelled it out and drank. The next time he left the canteen by the hollow, so Scar would get the man-smell of it. Each time during the day that he brought more water from the spring, he edged a little closer to the hollow from which Scar drank.

The stallion was ravenous. Brant climbed his legs off searching for grass. Scar ate it.

By late afternoon the boy could hunker down within six feet of him while he ate. He poured water into his hat, and set the hat down in the hollow. At dusk Scar reached out with his muzzle while Brant held the hat in his hands.

Another day went swiftly by, and another.

Slowly the wild panic, the fighting fury, had died in Scar's eyes. Perhaps, had he been well, it would never have departed. He was struggling back from the rim of death, and this slim scarecrow figure with the whispering voice was helping him.

The first time Brant laid the saddle blanket across his back, he shook it off. Later he permitted it to remain, loftily indifferent. When Brant first tied it on with a rope, Scar sidled, whistling, trying to reach with his teeth the thing constricting his belly. Drinking water from Brant's hat, he forgot about it.

Each day now, as he went farther afield after feed, the boy swept the canyons of the Hunchbacks with his glasses. If the wild horse round-up had been organized, he should be picking up a glimpse of it.

He had his moment of triumph, however, one evening just at dusk when he lifted his saddle and let the weight of it rest for a moment on Scar's back.

Day after day the saddle had been out in the open for Scar to smell and see. The feel of it on his back made the stallion's nostrils flare and his breath whistle. His muscles all bunched together, and for that moment he was wild again.

The boy's voice didn't rise, didn't sharpen. He was sweating, but he kept on talking as softly and steadily as he knew how.

Gradually the stallion relaxed, his trembling stopped.

Brant Logan was half laughing, half crying as he whispered, "A onery crowbait, ain't you, Scar. Ugly as all hell, an' good for nothin'."

Scar looked over his shoulder and took a nip at the boy's sleeve.

The day came when Brant Logan cinched the saddle down and stepped up in it. For a bare moment the stallion's legs stiffened; then he went on nuzzling with his lips at the grain Brant had poured out for him. He accepted the bridle and learned to obey it.

There was one thing Scar would not do—approach the jump leading down to the spring. That jump had balked him when he was dying. He had known that to take it would mean death. Nothing the boy could do would put him near it.

Two more days went by. On each of them the boy rode Scar a little more. The stallion was coming back fast. A week—ten days at the longest—and he would be fit for the trip down from the hills.

Brant's bacon and biscuits were running short. He divided what was left into seven portions, and decided he would have a mighty tight belt by the time he hit Uncle Ben's again. But it was going to be worth it.

After breakfast the next morning he ducked under the rope he had strung across a narrow place in the wash and began the increasingly long hunt for Scar's feed.

The stallion followed him as far as the rope, and circled there impatiently, whinnying.

The boy grinned over his shoulder.

He climbed on up the short ridge which angled away from the wash and took out Uncle Ben's binoculars for his customary study of the Hunchbacks. He was on the verge of tucking them away with a shrug when a flicker of movement caught his eye.

FAR below him and to the west a man had come into view on a pinnacle of rock. He waved a colored object—a neck-cloth probably—above his head as if signalling.

Puzzled, Brant frowned. He didn't recognize the man, as he would have had he been one of the ranchers likely to take part in the round-up.

It was nearly half an hour before the riders came out of the canyon which had been sheltering their advance. There were eight of them, driving half a dozen saddleless horses.

The frown lingered on the boy's thin, freckled face. He recognized Rockstro's blocky shoulders, the lean-waisted Milt Dalby, and Sheriff Lindskog. The rest of them, he guessed, were part of the Dalby's gun-quick Crossed Iron crew. There was no good reason for hazing horses into the Hunchbacks.

For an hour he watched as they worked their way into the hills. Finally, in a shallow canyon with a floor of sparse grass, they halted. The loose stock was allowed to graze there while the saddlers were taken back out of sight. The eight men then ranged themselves along both rims of the canyon. Sunlight picked out sparks along rifle barrels.

Brant Logan's eyes were aching, but he kept the glasses to them. What was being laid so carefully was a death trap. But who was to ride into it?

He turned the glasses west again, covering the broken slopes and ledges behind the pinnacle from which the unknown man had signalled.

For long minutes there was nothing. Then a faint curl of dust. Then more loose horses and men. They were coming down along the ledge.

Brant steadied the glasses against his drawn-up knees. He picked out Uncle Ben Gorst with his ragged white beard. Behind him were the Skagway brothers, Link and Ed, and Les Baylor. Dust obscured the others—six or seven of them, all told. Jim's scheme had sounded good to the men Milt Dalby was trying to smash, and Uncle Ben had led the expedition.

Then a faint curl of dust. Then more loose

They had their mustangs, too—perhaps a score of weary mares, colts and yearlings were bunched ahead of them. Two or three of the most obstreperous were neck-roped up short to the riding horses.

Brant came up fast to his feet, his throat starting a yell but not finishing it. Even gunshots, at this distance, couldn't be heard.

For an instant he had in his mind a clear and terrible picture of Uncle Ben Gorst and the others riding into that trap, and the slugs pouring down on them from the rims. Not one of them would ride out of there alive.

Sheriff Lindskog could say in his stony rasp: "We tracked 'em into the Hunchbacks. Sure, they had a sprinklin' of mustangs. But they had some of Dalby's best saddle stock, too. Rustlers an' horse thieves, the lot of 'em!"

If he could get down there, and warn them. . . .

But it was too far. And there wasn't time. It looked close, through the glasses. On foot, however, he could never in the world make it.

And then the boy froze. He could feel the chill of the blood in his veins.

He shouted, loud and angrily, "No! Not Scar! Not him. I won't!"

Maybe Scar could do it. Maybe the stallion could get him down there in time. But Scar wasn't ready. He wouldn't be ready for a week. To travel so soon down the harsh slopes of the Hunchbacks would kill him. Scar couldn't die now.

Unseeingly, Brant Logan stared at the little puff of dust kicked up by the mustangs and their captors. Six men riding to their certain death because they trusted Jim Logan's leadership. Following his orders. . . .

A dry sob racked the boy's chest. Behind his eyes was a fierce, burning ache.

He loved Scar, he guessed, more than any man had a right to love anything. Maybe this was what happened when you loved something too much. Because he knew what he had to do.

He didn't look down below him again. He went stumbling back to the wash. Scar snorted some cuss words at him because he had brought no grass. Brant fed him the biscuits that were left.

"Maybe," the boy whispered, "maybe this ain't goin' to be as bad as I think it is." But he knew that it was going to be.

He got Scar a long drink—all that was left in the spring—and saddled him and rode him back out of the wash.

Scar stopped, looking down over that country he knew so well, and the boy wondered what he was thinking. He couldn't bring himself to touch Scar's ribs with his heels. That was too much like putting a pistol against the stallion's head and pulling the trigger.

Scar started again of his own accord. Brant Logan pulled him over, away from the trail he wanted to follow, into the treacherous path he had to take.

That path would have tested the best of sound horses. Its steep pitches made worse by sliding shale and gaping fissures that had to be jumped. Narrow ledges angled down the face of jagged cliffs. Stretches of broken rock that wrenched at a mount's legs. Canyons to be circled.

Brant Logan didn't remember much of that. He did remember the sound of Scar's breath laboring in his lungs. He remembered the color of Scar's hoofs, for the half-healed cuts had opened again.

No horse understood such going more thoroughly; he had fought his way to kinghood here in the Hunchbacks, and his brain and his feet were tuned to them. Their wildness was in him. They had saved his life before this; now they were murdering him, but perhaps he didn't know that. More than once he staggered and kept going, the great heart in him still beating as a king's should.

Brant Logan didn't hear the shots. He didn't at first know what had happened when he felt the shocking pain in his side.

He lifted his head, and in front of him, all at once, unreeled the picture. It meant nothing to him, nothing at all.

The warning he had brought had done its work. Dalby's men were shooting at him. Uncle Ben Gorst and the others, coming down, had stopped short of the canyon trap. They hadn't been cut down without a chance, but they had a fight on their hands.

In that flash the boy saw it—the way Uncle Ben stood in the open, heedless of bullets, pumping lead back at the canyon rim. The way the Skagway brothers

rushed to cover him, gritty men who had been backed to the wall and were fighting a fight of wrathful desperation.

Lindskog and Dalby were there on the rim, guns bucking, powdersmoke coiling behind them.

Rockstro was there, too. He came up behind Lindskog and Dalby and shouted something, and both of them whirled toward him. . . .

The boy saw it all, and it was something remote, not touching him. The snarl of gunfire, the bounding echoes, the shouts, were only a rumbling undertone in his head. He had done what he had to do.

He stopped Scar and sprawled out of the saddle. The stallion stood with his red legs spraddled apart, his muscles shaking, his chest wrenched by the huge draughts of air which struggled in and out of his lungs.

The boy was sobbing, holding the great lowered head of the stallion in his arms.

He was like that, his cheek against the rough, lion-colored coat, when the pain in his side seemed to explode, and darkness overwhelmed him. . . .

HE CAME reeling and twisting up through that darkness, as if Scar were pitching under him. He thought he was struggling to keep his balance, but steady hands pushed against his shoulders, and Uncle Ben Gorst's voice said, "Easy now. There's a slug wedged between a couple of your ribs."

Brant Logan opened his eyes. He didn't have to shape the word that came. It burst out of his throat:

Uncle Ben said gently, "Ain't forgot Link Skagway's a vet, have you? Link's workin' on him."

"He ain't—ain't—?"

"He ain't no coddled barn pony that you got to put a petticoat on when you take him out in the rain!" Uncle Ben snorted. "Hell, you're closer to dead right now than he is! Link says he wishes he could count on livin' as long as that stallion figgers to."

Brant tried to get up. "I reckon I better—"

"Stay where you are. You'd only be in the way. . . . Son, Rockstro wants to talk to you."

"I don't want—to talk to him."

Uncle Ben Gorst's eyes were sober. "Don't be too hard on Rockstro, son. He had a reason for doin' what he did. Him bein' crippled up an' all, he knew he'd have to quit bronc-handlin'. It turned him kind of mean, I reckon, because he didn't know anything else. Milt Dalby offered him a stake, an'—well, he took it."

"Sellin' out his friends," said Brant bitterly.

"I know. Only when the chips were down, he couldn't do it. Dalby an' Lindskog would have took us, likely, if Rockstro hadn't pitched in on our side. He downed the two of 'em, though they got some lead into him first. My hunch is it was seein' you on Scar that made him change his mind. Anyhow, he did change it. He's dyin' an' he knows it. He signed a paper clearin' Jim. It was him run those broncs into the mountain corral, on orders from Dalby. . . . How about it, son? Shall I bring him over?"

"If he wants to come," the boy said, and closed his eyes.

Gorst and one of the ranchers carried Rockstro on an improvised stretcher and put him down beside Brant Logan.

For a long time Rockstro didn't say anything. That quality in his grim and taciturn face which had been frightening, was no longer there.

His voice was barely audible. "I couldn't ride him, kid, but an' you did. I ain't sorry that turned out—to be the way of it."

The boy said nothing.

"I know what's eatin' you," Rockstro whispered. "You figger I hate that Scar horse of yours. I don't hate him now, kid. Maybe I did once, but I don't now. I didn't want to die—without tellin' you that."

The boy turned his head. He reached out and gripped the hand that was groping toward him.

"Quit it, Rock. Scar ain't going to be a grudge horse. He's half yours. It was the two of us caught him."

Maybe Rockstro, who understood about a boy and a horse, heard him. Though his eyes were closed, yet the look of harshness—the look of a man who had condemned himself into a living hell—was at last gone from his face. . . .

THE END

By TOM ROAN

As big as the Devil himself, he stepped inside, his right hand around the butt of his old six-shooter. . . .

Dangerous Bill's Last Stand

For more than four-score years, Dangerous Old Bill Lockspur had run roughshod, whiskey-mean and hog-wild over the Boxed Rafter country, where burning out nesters and stringing up rustlers were part of the fun that comes after the day's work. . . .

HE WAS as drunk as a man could get, yet he still managed to sit the saddle of the wall-eyed, half-outlaw bay. With his massive shoulders and his broad back as straight as a ramrod, Dangerous Old Bill Lockspur and seven of his bleary-eyed riders pulled up at the one-roomed shack at the head of Wild Horse Gorge. It was nearly midnight.

He had seen the smoke that morning

from the west while riding homeward down rim of the gorge for the Boxed Rafter after spending a few days at a lonely line cabin on the north side of the range. It had made him as mad as Old Tom Walker right then, but he had gone on the eight miles to the big log ranch houses and corrals at the mouth of the gorge to pickle himself a little more in alcohol. But all day long he had sat and brooded. Taking a quirt to a squatter's seat once a year seemed to come along about the time Bill Lockspur was pitching his sprees.

Getting drunk on his birthday—and this was his eighty-fourth—was Bill Lockspur's one yearly adventure into the land of forgetfulness. A man never sure of the exact date—but dead-certain not to miss it—his birthdays began about the time the leaves started falling from the cottonwoods along the creeks. They continued until somebody reminded him that Christmas had come and gone a couple or six weeks behind him. There he halted, never looking another jug or bottle in the eye until November came rolling around again.

"I won't be long," he growled as he swung his huge figure out of his saddle and dropped his reins. "Set yore broncs an' watch the show. All I wanta do is start 'im headin' down the trail."

Even at his ripe old age, he was one of the most powerful men in Wyoming. He still boasted when drunk that he could whip his weight in wildcats or lick a grizzly bear in a stand-up or knock-down-and-drag fight. Those who doubted him had found to their sorrow that he spoke the truth. Well over six feet tall, he could fight like hell, or top a killer horse with the best of them.

Only his face and hair had grown old. His bristling hair was as white as the snow on the mountain peaks, and his face was bitter-lined and seamed from more than forty years of brooding over certain troubles most men had forgotten in the passing years. A carefully trimmed white beard hid some of the hard lines of the grim face.

Keen gray eyes looked out from beneath the thick brows above a big, hawkbill nose that had its own way of reminding people of something to split the wind. Only old men on the rangelands were able to remember that Dangerous Bill Lockspur had seen a time in his life when he could throw back his big shoulders and laugh all over creation without a half-gallon of rot-gut raw whiskey in his belly.

Black chaps swishing, big spurs dragging and a soft white hat on the back of his head, he moved on to the closed door ahead of him. The shack was niggardly enough in the cold moonlight. At the north end of it a thin streak of smoke lifted and reeled drunkenly away in the wind from the broken-lipped chimney.

Not bothering to knock, he lifted his right foot. One swift kick sent the door flying open with its old boards rattling and a wail of its rusty hinges filling his ears. As big as the Devil, he stepped inside, right hand about the butt of his six-shooter. He stood there blinking like an owl in the wiggly little blades of firelight that was not giving out enough heat to keep a cat warm.

Had he been looking into the muzzles of a pair of .45's he could not have been more surprised, for the first thing he saw was the child.

SHE was not much higher than his hip as she stood trying to hide in the corner beyond the rude fireplace. Big, wondering blue eyes were looking at his stern face. He saw that the brown dress she wore was not much more than a thin rag. He saw, too, that her feet were bare. For an instant some of the mean whiskey glint faded from Danger Old Bill Lockspur's eyes, but in another instant his voice seemed to jar the earthern floor of the room.

"Hello! Where's yore folks?"

"Poppy's sick," answered the child, glancing toward a lean-to bunk in the southeast corner of the room. "He can't get up."

"Don't let 'er fool yuh, Bill!" called out the ever-bullying voice of Tull Tolbert, his big cowboss, behind him. "For all yuh know he may be playin' 'possum on yuh!"

"I'm handlin' this!" snarled the cattleman as he closed the door behind him with a slap. "Mind yore own business!"

He walked on to the bunk. A man lay there, low in the blankets. He peered down into a thin, dark-bearded face, and saw that it was a young face in spite of the beard. The man's eyes were closed. His forehead looked white and staring. The cattleman touched his face lightly, then slid his big, cold right hand down under the blankets. Something warm and sticky touched his fingers. He withdrew his hand, looking at it as he straightened. There was blood on his thumb and forefinger.

"Yeah." He expelled his breath slowly with the word, still firing those all-knowing scowls around the room, at the empty shelves above the sheet-iron stove in the corner opposite the bunk, and allowing one scowl to halt for a moment on a few stale scraps of bread on the lean-to table beside the stove. "I—uh—guess yo're right, little 'un. Yore pappy's sick—yeah, yeah. Here," he slipped off his fur-lined old leather riding jacket. "Let's sorter wrop this 'round yuh; it's nice an' warm. There! Now yuh go over yonder an' set close to the fire in that old chair. I won't be gone more'n a minute."

He went outside, carefully closing the door behind him, face grimmer than when he had gone inside. His men had dismounted and were standing in a huddle as if each one was trying to keep his horse between him and the rising wind.

They turned and looked at him wonderingly. Tull Tolbert had just opened a quart bottle of whiskey he had removed from a pocket on his saddle. The old man reached forward and took it out of his hand, and held it up between him and the moon as if to make certain the bottle was full.

"I'll take the cork, too, Tull," he told the man in his usual growl that seemed to come all the way from his feet. "I may need this. Yuh take Frank, Tom, Jack an' George with yuh. Yuh high-tail 'er up that old trail in the ledges." He pointed to a ragged line up through the rocks in the western wall of the gorge. "Burn them seven miles down betwix here an' Deer Creek. Bring Doc Sam Harper back with yuh. Bud an' Windy are goin' to start work on that old woodpile for some quick firewood. Somethin' what'll burn good.

"Never mind!" He held up his hand as Tolbert opened his mouth to say something. "I know how Doc Sam is about travelin' on a windy night, but yuh tell 'im I said get here. Yuh tell 'im yo've come to fetch 'im in his drawers an' bare feet, if he won't get outa bed an' come like a man. I want 'im here, an' I want 'im fast.

"An' there's more'n that". The hand went up again. "While yo're gettin' Doc Sam, Tull, the other boys'll be makin' ol' Joe Stout open up his general store. Each one of yuh bring a sack of grub, the best an' all the trimmin's Joe's got. Charge it to me, of course. But get there fast, an' get back fast. There ain't nothin' to eat in that shack, an' that squatter in there has been shot. He's got a hole in 'im big enough for a cow to jump in.

"Yuh see," he finished lamely, "I didn't know that squatter had a child up here with 'im."

"Hell, I could told yuh that before we left the ranch tonight!" Tull Tolbert leaned back on his long boot heels and let out one of his usual bellows of laughter. "I was a little ahead of yuh this mornin', yuh see. I saw the brat tryin' to pick up chips at the woodpile. She run like a gopher when she saw me. I was goin' to shoot my gun to scare her—"

"That ain't funny, Tull."

With the low growl of a bulldog, Lockspur changed hands with the bottle of whiskey. His right fist drove forward, big as a football, hard as a pile-driver with all the old man's weight behind the sudden blow. It smashed flat on Tolbert's chin, lifted him in the air, and sent him pitching backward on the half-frozen ground to land on his neck and shoulders like a beef brought down by a rifle ball.

"Now he'p 'im on his hoss, boys," ordered the old man in that same slow growl. "His way of laughin' allus sorter got me, anyhow. Who'd I tell to start choppin' wood?"

SCOWLING, and with the bottle still clutched in his left hand, he watched Frank Steel, Tom Price, Jack Brown and George Overland ride away half-supporting the burly cowboss be-

tween them. Bud Green and Windy Mann had moved on to the old woodpile. The last squatter to leave the shack with his trousers smoking had had no time to take along his axe. It was there, red with rust and its handle loose, but it would still chop.

Old Bill Lockspur turned and moved back to the door of the shack. Old fools would be old fools, he guessed, pausing to glance up at the cold little moon. He pushed open the door. The little girl was watching him.

He saw her smile as if she was not afraid of him any more. Devilish pretty, that brat! There was something about her that made him stand there for a moment, back to the door as he closed it. The kid reminded him of somebody, somewhere, or was it just the whiskey? Well, of course! Of late he was always imagining he was seeing things.

"Yuh warm now?" he made the attempt of a smile as he gandered at the child. "Old jacket's good, ain't it?"

"Yes," she answered. Then: "I'm a big girl. I'm four years old."

"Oh, y'ar?" He tried to smile. "Well, that's fine. I'm four, too. Eighty-four. Yo've got a lot ahead of yuh. Yuh just set tight where yuh are. There'll be a big fire here in a minute."

He stood the bottle on the table, and took another look at the man on the bunk. Sort of nice-lookin' fella, he reckoned, but paie as a last year's Christmas candle. There was a cracked water glass on the table. He blew the dust out of it, and spilled it half-full of whiskey.

When Bud Green and Windy Mann came in with their arms filled with wood he was holding the whiskey to the lips of the man on the bunk.

"A little he'p here, Windy," he ordered. "Let Bud build up that fire. This fella's near gone."

Together they got some of the drink down the man, spilling half of it, and then roughly tucked the blankets closer around him. For about a minute they stood there looking down on the white forehead. Suddenly the old man lifted the bottle and squinted at it. He took a drink, made a wry face, and handed the bottle to the cowboy.

"Tull was never known," he swore whisperingly, "to buy nothin' less'n a hundred proof."

The fire was beginning to crackle. He tried to ignore the kid, yet he could not keep from watching her from the corners of his eyes. She did remind him of *somebody!* But maybe all kids were alike, more or less. Or so it seemed to him of late.

"What's yore name?" he wanted to know, dropping to a squat on one heel beside her.

"My name's Anna Lee," she smiled as if glad of his attention again. "What's your name, mister?"

"Who—mine?" He sawed off his hat and scratched his head. "Oh! Why, I'm Bill. Just Bill. Ain't purty, is it? When I was young they called me William now an' then."

"William is a nice name, Mr. Bill." She smiled again. "My pop's name is William."

"Oh." He stared into the fire. "Well, that's good, I guess. I sorter like some people by that name." Under his breath, still squinting into the fire, he rolled the child's name on his tongue. Then he frowned as he spoke outright again. "How long has it been since yo've had anything to eat?"

"Not long, mister." She started to slip out of his old jacket and the chair. "I had bread. There's some on the table. I'll give you—"

"No, no, youngster." He caught her,

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pulling her back gently. "Here, now, I'll take the chair an' yuh set in my lap. I'll wrop yuh in the jacket. Before long we'll be cookin' up a fine batch of grub, an' then we'll all eat."

He was sitting there with the child sound asleep in his lap when Dr. Sam Harper came. At times he appeared to doze. A small left hand was gripped around his right thumb as if holding him to keep him from getting up and going away. A thousand memories had burned through Dangerous Bill Lockspur's brain before the hoofs came pounding up outside and the short, round-bellied doctor was hurried inside.

Getting up carefully when the man moved back to the bunk with his black bag, Lockspur made a pallet for the child with his old vest on the floor, and gently laid her down. He had some trouble easing that small fist from around his thumb. It awakened memories of another hand he used to have the same trouble with in the far past.

As he moved toward the bunk Harper stepped away from it, looking him up and down with a queer smile.

"This is like you, Bill." The doctor's smile broadened. "You would try playing Good Samaritan to a first-class outlaw!"

"So?"

"Yes," nodded the doctor. "Only yesterday afternoon this man shot his way through a posse as he came across Gold Spoon Pass. He shot up—"

The doctor was cut short by the rapid sounds of hoofs coming from westward as if jarring the ground. A gang of men outside flung themselves out of their saddles. In a few moments the door was flung open.

Sheriff Big Blaze Marshall stood there, one hand on the butt of a Colt, dark-bearded face hard-set, black eyes raking the room. Just behind him appeared the drunken face of Tull Tolbert. Behind Tolbert, swarming up like a cloud, were a dozen more men.

"So I see!" nodded Lockspur. "Tull heard some talk in Deer Crick, I reckon, while waitin' for Doc. Sorter smellin' reward money, maybe, he run to yuh. All right, Blaze." His big right hand had already dropped to the butt of the Colt at his hip. "Yuh can come in—an' shut that door behind yuh. The others stay out."

"Who in hell," snarled the sheriff, "are yuh to be givin' me orders, Bill Lockspur."

"Easy, Blaze," warned the old man. "Yuh know who give 'em. Yuh didn't need to come stormin' out here with half of Deer Crick behind yuh, to put yore talons on a half-dead man."

"Yo're gettin' to be a bigger fool ever' day!" sneered the sheriff, slowly pushing the door closed behind him with his spurred heel. "We'll be sendin' yuh to the crazy house yet, Lockspur. I want that buzzard on the bunk, an' when I want a man I take 'im!"

"No, mister!" The child was up, darting forward. She placed herself between Marshall and Lockspur. "You can't hang my pop!"

"This proves it!" cried the sheriff, a man never known to admit defeat, right or wrong, in any argument. "The dude who shot his way through Gold Spoon had a kid with him!"

"Yeah?" Lockspur reached out with his left hand and carefully pawed the child back against him. "That may be so, an' it may not. But why did this fella have to shoot his way through a gang waylayin' the trail over Gold Spoon?"

"He belongs to a bunch of rustlers who've been terrorizin' honest ranch folks in the Big Hole Country!" barked the sheriff. "Now stand out of the way."

Bill Lockspur made one mistake as the sheriff moved on toward the bunk. He swung around with the child before him to watch the sheriff. As he turned, the door swung open. Tull Tolbert and Seth Dunbar, Marshall's tall, hawk-nosed deputy, stood there, covering him with six-shooters.

"I don't take hammerin' on the jaw from nobody, Bill Lockspur!" sneered the cow-boss. "Get yore hands up!"

MEN swore afterwards that it was nothing more than a drunken slip of the trigger-finger on the part of the bullying Tull Tolbert. A shot ripped across the room.

A scream of terror came from the child. Lockspur staggered as the bullet smashed through his arm. He swung half-around with one hand sweeping and crowding the

child behind him. The old Colt roared twice at his hip without leaving its holster.

Tull Tolbert bucked forward at the middle. Stern-backward he pitched out the door.

In the excitement Seth Dunbar had pulled his trigger and sent a bullet smashing into the ceiling, bringing down a cloud of dust and splinters. He turned, suddenly green-yellow at the corners of his mouth, and plunged head-first to the ground over the body of the cow-boss.

When the sheriff's bullet struck him, Lockspur was still on his feet with the child crawling under the bunk behind him. Both men went smashing to the floor, one mortally wounded, the other a powerful brute who had won many fights in rough-and-tumble matches. In another sudden drumming of shots outside they rolled over, surging back and forth across the room while old Doc Harper leaped on the bunk, crowding himself down behind the wounded man.

Suddenly the sheriff was sprawled loosely along the wall. . . .

Outside the shack a furious battle was carried on with cold, last-hope desperation. It had started with the same quickness Tull Holbert's shot had started a full-swing fight inside.

Reports had been going the rounds for weeks that Idaho Sam Brown, sheriff of the Big Hole Country, was offering a flat reward of one thousand dollars a head for the rustlers terrorizing his regions. Reward-hungry men were here, and they were not going to be denied a chance to collect.

Caught in the rush of the sudden excitement, Windy Mann had shot down the first posseman. There had been no sense to it. When Tolbert and Dunbar had come buckling back out of the doorway, other startled men had started clawing for their six-shooters.

With a squall that might have come from a wildcat, Mann had flung his wood aside and slapped his hand to the butt of his Colt.

The four riders who had gone to Deer Creek with Tolbert had just come galloping up with sacks from the general store tied behind the cantles of their saddles. A burly posseman had whirled on Windy Mann just as those riders were slinging themselves out of their saddles. The cowboy had opened fire.

"They shot Bill!" Windy Mann was squalling.

It was like a cyclone there in the wind and frosty air with the weak little moon shining down. Six-shooters roared belly to belly. Fists smashed. Butts and Colt barrels came smashing down, opening scalps and splattering blood.

Inside the shack, Old Bill rubbed a swiping hand across his face, and felt a great weakness coming over him. Spitting blood on the floor, he saw the sheriff stir.

With an effort that taxed every muscle in his body to the limit, Marshall was getting to his hands and knees.

Cunning in any fight, he slipped suddenly and came down on his left side, the cold and deadly fighting man not waiting for the proper moment to down his intended victim with one quick shot.

It would not be long. The sheriff saw the old man's knees wobble. Lockspur's hand went to his face again. Even in the noise coming from outside Marshall heard the old man start muttering.

"Forty-four year' ago, 't'was," he was baggling like an old gobbler. "Drove her away from my door, I did, an' drove her mother to her grave three year' later 'cause I was so no-account mean. The dude she married mighta been all right at that, for all I know, but I couldn't get over thinkin' I'd heard that his folks had run sheep up Montana-way. Drove her from my door, I did. Told 'er never to darken it agin. Forty-four year' ago."

He staggered. It was the sheriff's cunningly-awaited chance. His right hand moved, slinging hipward. It missed the butt of a six-shooter with its first grab, because the weapon had been swung behind him on its belt during the fight. With an oath he got his hand on it. He was coming out of the holster with it—moving with the quickness of a striking cat's paw —when the old man-mountain hurled himself upon him with the squall of a wounded cougar.

THE harsh heel of a big boot kicked the six-shooter out of the sheriff's hand and sent it bouncing along the wall as more shots roared outside.

The old man came down, driving astride of Marshall like a buckaroo leaping to the back of a fighting horse from a corral fence. His old knees, that could make a bareback horse bawl in the grip of their powerful squeeze, closed in.

"Forty-four year' ago, 'twas!" he was crying, his old eyes gleaming like stars. "Druv from my door 'cause I didn't like the man I'd never seen. She had pride, my Anna Lee did. Pride she musta got from the damn' ol' fool that was nobody but me!"

His great old hands, hard as iron from all their years of toil, were on the sheriff's throat, the old fingers like knotty lumps of steel.

"Some little part of her come back to me," he was crying, big tears streaming down his cheeks and thinning the blood and bubbles on his lips. "Some little part, an' yuh come to take it away. But yuh can't do this to me. Damn the law an' the men who make it to feather their own nest. Some little bit of Anna Lee come back to me, I tell yuh. An' yuh come here to take it away!"

The sheriff's eyes bulged. His head lifted, and bent backward. A drop of blood came from the white-whiskered lips above him and splattered down on his face. And the old eyes up there were still filled with something akin to laughter.

Suddenly there was a slight sound, like the muffled snapping of a stick.

"There, there," whispered the old man, the terrible hands relaxing. "Yo're clean gone outa yore misery an' mean ways now."

* * *

The fight outside was still raging. Outnumbered as they were, what was left of the Boxed Rafter cowboys had had to pull themselves out of it and seek shelter where they could find it. Now it was from bush to bush, rock to rock; a quick shot here and another there, then a wild break for another spot that would offer some refuge.

A cloud of horsemen coming up the gorge proved to be a Godsend, and not a man in the crowd was sorry that they had come. At the head of the newcomers, mounted on a sweat-slinging fire-ball of a black horse rode a tall, gray-mustached man of fifty with a star gleaming, like an eye of fire, on the left side of his vest. He was scattering his men out into a circle closing all around the shack. It was not until then that somebody among the fighting men had sense enough to recognize Idaho Sam Brown, sheriff of the Big Hole Country.

"Shut 'er down!" the man bellowed in a voice that seemed to reach from one end of the gorge to the other. *"Shut 'er down!* We've got the whole fightin' mess of yuh surrounded. Nary a man'll get away! We'll blast the first polecat who starts to run!"

The coming of that crowd was enough to stop anything. Men swung out of their saddles. Men with bloody faces, broken hands and heads were dragged out of the bushes and herded together with Idaho Sam Brown showering them with his choicest curses when somebody tried to tell him what had happened.

"That fella an' the kid?" he snorted. "Yeah, of course I know about him. He ain't no rustler, damn it. There's some people in this country over-bountiful hungry for reward money when they hear about it.

"Shore, that fella shot his way through the pass. Why not? A gang of hide-outs up there opened fire on 'im without warnin'. They didn't give 'im no chance to tell who he was or where he as goin'. After they was licked in the pass, they spread the tale he was one of the rustlers. *Rustler!"* He spat violently on the ground. "That's Bill Prince. I've knowed him all his life. Get the hell out of my way!"

He moved on into the doorway and stopped. One look at the still figure of the Sheriff of Deer Creek lying on the floor was enough to make him slowly lift his hand and take off his hat. The sheriff was dead, his neck broken, the marks of the terrible hands still there in the throat.

"Yo've always done my legal-like things, Doc." Dangerous Old Bill Lockspur was slumped flat on the floor against the wall. "Yo'll see that she an' her pop gets the Boxed Rafter, won't yuh? Yuh—yuh won't fail me?" The old man's voice was going fast. "Yuh never have yet, Doc."

"No, Bill," the doctor was saying, "I won't fail you. And he's going to pull through. He's only lost a lot of blood. All he needs is rest and care, and plenty of good grub like the kind you always feed at the Boxed Rafter."

"That's—good," broke in the cattleman with a sickly smile. "I know I can depend on yuh. . . . Forty-four year' ago, 'twas."

He slipped to one side, the smile still on his face.

Dr. Harper's eyes were moist as he arose, and glanced at Sheriff Brown.

"I think you'd better come with me, Idaho," he suggested, taking the sheriff's arm to lead him outside. "I've always had the belief that the spirit hangs around the body for quite a while after death, and I want Bill to rest in peace. His daughter that he ran off from home died years ago without ever having a child. . . But the danged old fool—"

He broke off sharply as a bellowing roar came from inside the cabin. Dr. Harper and Idaho Sam Brown whirled, their jaws dropping, their eyes bugging out.

There, before their startled glances, stood Old Bill Lockspur, a man from a nightmare, Marshall's blood mingling with his own on his soaked shirt. But there was nothing nightmarish about the liveliness in his eyes, nor in his grim smile, as he derisively waved a half filled whiskey bottle at them.

"Danged ol' fool, nothin'!" he roared, supporting himself by leaning against the door-jamb. "I mighta knowed if I went an' died right now that you two buzzards would spread such lies about Anna Lee an' her pop. . . ."

And, later, Dr. Harper swore to Idaho Sam Brown that he saw Old Bill Lockspur's left eyelid lower in a wink. " 'Tain't so, I tell yuh," Old Bill's voice roared on. "An' I'm fixin' to stay alive to prevent such malicious windies about my kin-folks from spreadin' on this range. Plumb blasph-eemous, b'Gawd!"

Dr. Harper grinned at Sheriff Idaho Sam Brown before he went forward to do the big job of patching up Old Bill Lockspur. "I reckon, Sam," he grunted, "that we'll have to spend the rest of our lives to live down such—" he gulped "—such a lyin' windy. How I ever got that idea about Bill's daughter, I don't know! Lend a hand here, Sam!"

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did — Actually and Literally)

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and—now—? —well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County, I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest, unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 33, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1940, Frank B. Robinson.

Stampede at Painted Rock

By LLOYD ERIC REEVE

The bullet sent him backward, over the arroyo edge. . . .

When stark panic swept the frontier, cowtown banks closed their doors, bringing misery and hunger to a thousand honest ranch families. . . . But Banker John Harkness foresaw that dark tide and decided to make his last gamble on a ready gun, a fast horse—and an empty vault!

ON THAT fateful day, of course, John Harkness didn't wear buckskins. These days, as became Painted Rock's only banker, he dressed neatly in dark broadcloth, high-heeled boots, and black sombrero.

He wore the sombrero as sombreros should be worn, indoors as well as out. He even wore it now, in his cubby-hole office at the bank, set firmly on the back of his gray head, the high-heeled boots cocked up on his desk. His slight body, tough and sinewy, carried easily the weight of his years. Even his seamed face was calm. Only the gray eyes revealed a welling despair.

With a sudden decisive movement, he swung his feet off the desk. He stood up. He opened a drawer in the desk and took out a cartridge belt and six-shooter. He buckled it around his flat old stomach.

In just ten minutes John Harkness was going to hold up a bank. The bank he was going to hold up was his own bank!

He sat down again to wait. He wanted to do this exactly at the closing minute. That way it might not be discovered for hours. It should reasonably assure him a good head-start on any pursuit.

He took out his watch, snapped back the lid. He looked at the lock of auburn hair coiled in the cover. He smiled faintly. Mary would understand what he was about to do. No one else would understand. But Mary would. Mary was his wife. She had been dead five years.

He watched the slow march of the minute hand. Finally he snapped the watch shut. He stood up, as he heard Frank Grable, the cashier, locking the outer door. Only he and Frank would be inside now.

Early autumn dusk was already purpling against the barred windows as Harkness walked into the bank's main room. Frank had returned to the cashier's cage, and was counting a stack of bills near the kerosene lamp. He was a small man, bald-headed and turning stout. He and John Harkness had been friends for years.

Harkness sighed. He walked around the cashier's cage and went in the back. Frank Grable continued to thumb bills off the stack.

He said, without looking around: "John, this is going to be hell. Hardly anyone knows yet. But come morning, they'll stampede us. We got less than twenty thousand in cash."

John Harkness didn't answer. After an instant, Frank looked curiously around. And then he spun to face his employer, eyes flared and jaw sagging. John Harkness held the six-shooter lightly. It was leveled directly at Frank Grable's lean stomach.

"Stand still, Frank," John Harkness said. "Did you think I'd be such a fool as to wait and let 'em break me? Not by a long shot. It's every man for himself now. I'm taking what cash there is, and clearing out."

He had to make it sound good, had to make Frank believe it. He couldn't risk leaving Frank to be accused as an accomplice, maybe even lynched.

Frank Grable's Adam's apple scurried up and down his neck. His eyes seemed about to burst. "John!" he gasped. "You don't know what you're doing! It's driven you out of your head! You can't possibly get away with this!"

John Harkness said, "Shut up, Frank. Lie down on your face so I can tie you up. I don't aim for you to blatt this until morning."

"John, you skunk!" Grable blurted. "No, I don't mean that, but by the Almighty—"

"Lie down." The gun in John Harkness' hand was as steady as death. Grable stared at it for a long instant. But then with a slow reluctance, he went first to his knees, so that he looked a little like a man praying. Then he stretched out on his face.

John Harkness took some short ropes from his pocket. He tied Frank's wrists behind his back, bound his ankles together.

With his face against the floor, Frank Grable said bleakly, "John, Mary's turning in her grave."

"No," Harkness denied softly. "No, she isn't. If anything, she's smilin' at me."

He rolled Frank onto his back and gagged him with a clean bandana. He didn't tie the gag very tight because he wanted his friend to be as comfortable as possible. Turning away, methodically he began the rest of his task. He didn't intend to speak to Frank again, or look at him.

He still had quite a lot to do. First he collected all the cash, stowing it in two canvas sacks. Then he gathered up all ledgers and records, tying them securely in a large bundle.

AS HE worked, he kept reviewing the stunning sequence of this day. The first wire had come through about noon. Once again an old law was proving that two and two will never make ten. The Coast stock exchange had become bedlam. Already three city banks had closed.

John Harkness knew about panics. This would sweep the hinterland West, wiping out the country banks, cattlemen, sheepmen, and miners; the widows and orphans and helpless aged.

All afternoon the telegraph keys had chattered, flashing the black news all across the land. As yet it was formative. But during the coming night it would spread like a cataclysmic storm. By morning this little bank would inevitably face a run, a run which, with its small cash reserve, it couldn't survive even half a day.

And yet the bank was sound. John Harkness believed in making money work. He never kept in cash more than the bare fifteen per cent the law demanded. He counted his assets only in the eyes and hearts of the men to whom he loaned, in the tawny grass that fed their herds, the instinct for gold and silver in the grubbing prospecor, in the turning ploughs and swelling seeds of the toiling homesteader. His investments had been investments only in humanity. His success was the paradoxical one of a banker who had never been able to say no.

Few of the men he backed, thinking quietly by themselves, would never question his integrity; and yet, all together, swept up on the crest of a near-national calamity, they would wildly stampede the bank, blindly ruining both themselves and the man who had made the bank possible. The loco fever of a bank-run, John Harkness thought, was little different from that of a lynch mob.

His bank was the stout heart of this whole community, pumping its money into the stores and ranches and mines, into the work that made the food that fed the bodies. If it stopped the whole countryside would stop.

Harkness sighed again as he carried the money and records to a rear door. Leaving them just inside, he went out, locking the door. It was already dark, a chill wind keening in from the vastly surrounding mountains and desert. He followed a back alley to his house.

There, he made up a pack of supplies and changed his clothes. When he came out again he looked like any shabby old prospector. In the pungent darkness of the barn he saddled one of his two horses, and then led them both back to the bank.

He got the money and records, lashed them on the pack horse. Overhead the stars burned brilliantly, and a faint radiance came from a nearby street lamp at the mouth of the alley. He knew he had been crowding his luck, and wasn't greatly surprised when a passerby stopped abruptly under the street lamp.

Suddenly the man barged forward, recklessly grabbing for a gun. He shouted: "Hey, you! By hell, you're robbing the bank!"

John Harkness stood poised an instant. Then his wiry old body leaped toward the attacking man. He swerved to one side as the fellow's gun crashed, heard the faint wail of a passing bullet.

Lunging forward, he had his own gun in hand. But he didn't want to kill anybody. He even felt remotely approving of anyone trying to protect the bank. Swerving into the man, he struck up the gun just as it blazed again. With the barrel of his own weapon he tapped the man sharply on the head, and followed up with a hard blow from his left fist. The fellow catapulted against the bank wall.

Harkness wrenched the gun from his hand, tossed it away, and loped back to his horses. Mounted, he wheeled the two animals and pounded up the alley.

He was breathing a little heavily, but that was all. One part of him, deep inside, was mildly pleased. Not many men his age could put on a show like this—specially bank presidents. Danged if he didn't doubt if there was another bank president in the whole almighty country who could have done it!

He turned deliberately and raced down the main street, then out the eastern edge of town. A disordered shouting behind warned that the bank-robbery was already being comprehended, that amazed townsmen would shortly shape up some sort of pursuit.

For several minutes he loped eastward,

then turned off the road and began circling back around the town. Pursuit would fan eastward in the direction he had left, and his plan now was to escape westward, in the opposite direction.

He wasn't greatly worried. In the darkness he was fairly safe, and by morning he should be well concealed in the hideout he had selected. Mostly he was fretting about the man he had struck in the alley. At the last instant he had recognized him as Tod Ellis who ran the livery stable, and Tod—like Frank Grable—had been John Harkness' friend for years.

Harkness spat his disgust into the enormous desert night. This business of being an absconding banker just wasn't anything a decent man could cotton to.

BEFORE dawn he reached his hideout, an abandoned mine in the sagebrush hills some sixteen miles west of town. Years ago he had worked this mine, and knew just where a sidehill tunnel entered the ancient honeycombing.

He led the two horses in, and soon found the vaulted chamber he remembered. Here was an underground spring, old mine timbers for a fire, and he'd brought along grain for the horses and grub for himself. For a time he could stay buried here. But later he would have to get in touch with the outside, learn what was happening, and what they were trying to do about his bank.

He grinned. Not that they could do much, when he had taken not only the cash, but every last ledger. Even a court couldn't do much to close out a bank, when they hadn't even the scrap of a record.

So for a time John Harkness waited there. It was a kind of life he was glad to taste again. He'd turned into a banker pretty late, after years of mining, punching cattle, stage driving, freighting. Yes, and once he'd even herded sheep. But he'd stopped that in time, he thought with a faint grin, before he had begun sitting up nights trying to figure out which side of a square blanket was longest.

Fact was, he'd been a banker several years before he knew it himself. Mainly because he'd never been able to hang onto money. That wasn't the way he'd heard bankers were made, but it had been his way, and still was. Grubstaking some prospector, and finding pretty soon he was part owner in a mine; helping some friend to buy a few head of cattle, and reaping his share in some later half crop; finding himself tied in on a stage-line, ranches, a couple of stores.

There came the time when he'd had to tally up, tie things together, so he'd hired Frank Grable. Calling himself a bank had seemed the easiest way. But the money had still remained the unimportant part; all his investments had been simply in men, and the grip of a sincere and friendly hand was still more binding to him than all the legal papers ever signed.

An off breed, he guessed, these frontier bankers, same as the sawbones and lawyers. Had their own way of doing things, and the rest of the world could laugh, but just the same he had his hunch they were playing their part in building this thing called democracy, and making it tick, at that. . . .

* * *

The rickety buildings of Rawhide, mining camp and supply center, were scattered along the two sides of a mountain gulch, some twenty miles from Medicine Rock. There were two stores, a stage station, and Wash Balcher's saloon. Through Balcher's flowed miners, cowpunchers, freighters, gamblers, and if a man were so minded he could, by idling

If you thrill to the dramatic writing style of Lloyd Eric Reeve, who penned this story, you'll want to read his appealing love story of the covered-wagon days in the current RANGELAND ROMANCES! Don't miss "Susanna, Don't You Cry," or any of the other exciting sagas of romance and adventure in the big April issue!

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there, hear just about all the news there was to hear.

It was one night a couple of weeks later that an elderly man in the tattered garments of a prospector, unshaven, his gray hair unkempt, wandered into Balcher's.

He sat alone at a table in a dim corner, listening to the talk that flowed over the gaming tables and along the crowded bar. Even a close friend would have been hard put to recognize John Harkness.

Talk of the panic dominated that smoky room. Runs had closed a great many small banks, and then there was the case of the banker, John Harkness, who had absconded. Sarcasm punctuated the remarks about John Harkness. Respected and trusted everywhere, John Harkness had still been the one to think only of himself when the pinch came. If he was ever caught he would likely be lynched. Had it coming to him, by grab!

Much of the ruin had been senseless. Runs had badgered many sound little banks into destruction. Yet the panic had not become national. It had been localized, and already a resuming flow of finance was vitalizing again the veins of commerce.

John Harkness was not hearing news. He was simply hearing proof of what he already knew. . . .

Late in the evening he went drifting out of the noisy saloon. Only one man had given him a second glance. That was Mort Snaven, a faro dealer.

Snaven sensed vaguely he had seen the old prospector somewhere before, and at the same time—though he didn't at once connect the two thoughts—found himself remembering how once he had tried to raise a loan at a bank, from Harkness.

Snaven had heard that almost anyone could get a loan from Harkness. But Snaven hadn't. John Harkness had reminded Snaven that he had recently been caught cheating at cards.

"I'd lend an honest man the shirt off my back," John Harkness had said. "But not a man who cheats at cards."

Snaven hadn't liked it then, and still didn't. The old hypocrite, talking like a sniveling parson, and then up and robbing his own bank!

He kept wondering why the old prospector had started him thinking about John Harkness. He wished he could catch Harkness himself. Except he'd never turn him over to the law. He'd shoot the old coot and grab all that money. . . .

Back at the abandoned mine John Harkness hunkered down before his fire. So they wanted to lynch him. . . . Couldn't say he blamed them.

"But then, hell," he grinned to himself, "they might be willing to forego that pleasure if they found out the bank could take up again right where it had left off. Without losses."

John Harkness wanted to be sure the storm had really blown itself out. He had to give folks a chance to quiet down. To be able to see straight and think straight. So he waited another three weeks.

Then one night, just for a final check-up, he went back to Balcher's, sat listening again at his table in the shadows. . . .

The panic was definitely ended. Most of the closed banks were paying off on court orders at about ten cents on the dollar. The only one which nothing had been done about was John Harkness'; that one had the law baffled, for what could you do about closing out a bank when its absconding president hadn't left you even the scrap of a record to work on? John Harkness grinned to himself.

For the most part he remained unnoticed, though he was aware that one faro dealer did cast him an occasional curious glance. Something about the fellow was familiar, and finally Harkness remembered him as Mort Snaven, a gambler he had once refused a loan.

Presently Harkness left. His business here was settled. He was going back to his hide-out, get the money and records and take them back to Painted Rock. He figured simply to walk in, tell them he had brought back their money, say that now the storm was over the bank was opening up again, as sound as it ever was.

He got back to the mine about midnight. Soon he had the money and records packed on one horse, the other saddled, and was leading them out the old tunnel. He reached the outer darkness, under the flaming stars.

Harkness put one foot in the stirrup, about to swing up, and then the gun crashed. A bullet plunged against the saddle, splattering his face with bits of

flying leather and scaring the horse into a wild leap.

John Harkness ran backward, pulling his gun. He glimpsed a ghostly figure dodging through the moonglow into the protecting shadow of a looming rock. He fired, and a gun blazed back.

All in an instant he was sensing what had happened, that someone in Rawhide had recognized him, shadowed him back here, was now trying to catch him.

Harkness was still dodging backward, trying to confuse the other's aim, but he pulled up sharply now, suddenly aware he had come to the very edge of a deep arroyo.

At the same instant he saw his attacker spring from behind the shadowing rock, surged toward him in a blurred rush, his gun blazing. Harkness stood there, unable to retreat with the arroyo behind him, and fired back at the dodging figure. With a cold satisfaction he saw the man suddenly swerve and stagger. For just an instant he believed he had dropped him, but then the reeling figure straightened abruptly, whirled and fired again.

Harkness heard that bullet ring against a rock, and then something struck his left shoulder a dull blow. Even as he reeled backward, feeling an empty space under his kicking feet, he sensed he had been hit only by the ricochet of a spent bullet, but it had thrown him enough off balance to pitch him backward over the edge.

He was falling through space, then struck solidly, bounced, rolled over and over down a steep slope. Something banged against his head. Everything went black. . . .

CONSCIOUSNESS seeped back, memory returned. He was sprawled on the bottom of the arroyo, most likely thought dead by the ambusher. By now the fellow would have escaped, be far gone with that money which John Harkness had been so fully confident of protecting.

Slowly, he got to his feet, trying his limbs cautiously, finding that nothing was actually broken. He began picking his way back up the arroyo wall, having to circle so widely that a full half hour was consumed before he finally reached the top. And he had no idea how long he had been unconscious.

Some distance from the mine tunnel he saw a drifting shadow, recognized it as his own saddle horse. Apparently the thief had not wasted the time to catch it. He walked the horse down, secured it, then he turned back toward the tunnel where the pack horse had stood.

Presently he stumbled over a large bundle. It contained the bank records, slashed open by the thief, and then abandoned as valueless. Naturally, he had burdened himself only with the money.

John Harkness sat down, holding his aching head in his hands. From the start he had never thought of himself as an absconding banker. In his own way he had only been trying to protect his depositors.

Yet now he had become actually an absconder. He couldn't return to open the bank again—not with the money gone! He'd be arrested, or more likely lynched. All he could do now was to turn tail and run, finish off his years in desolate exile.

He had tried to play God, and learned, as man must, that he was only mortal.

He took out his old watch, opened the lid. In the darkness his eyes couldn't see the lock of auburn hair curled there. But his tough old heart could.

"Mary," he said, "I'm an old fool." He said, "Mary, I'm an absconder."

And suddenly then he knew he wasn't. It was as though he actually heard her voice, denying that bitter accusation. He knew suddenly that he had to go back to Painted Rock, even if it meant his being lynched.

He had sat in on this game, figuring to win. But the cards had fallen wrong. All he could do now was to run a last, desperate bluff.

That bluff. . . . If it didn't work—and the odds were a thousand to one against him there—he'd pay for trying it with his life, likely kicking his life out at the noose end of a rope, while the citizens he'd sought to save looked on with grim satisfaction. If the bluff did work—and it was the only thing he could try—he could make good the loss of the money within a week, if not sooner from his own personal holdings, now that the panic had died down.

The critical time would be during the first half hour—a few tense minutes when he faced his Painted Rock neighbors at the bank. If he was alive at the end of that time, his friends who had once trusted him would trust him again.

The chips were already down. He'd literally be risking his neck on the same gamble he'd taken most of his life. It was the one card he had left to play, but still the only one he'd ever really counted on—his stubborn, militant faith in his fellow men.

John Harkness stood up. He felt almighty tired, yet there was a new spring of energy to his old frame as he picked up the bank records, mounted his horse, and headed back through the night toward Painted Rock. . . .

* * *

Nailed to the door of the closed bank of Painted Rock that next morning was an amazing announcement. Excited men congregated before it, staring. The news spread swiftly. By ten o'clock riders were dusting in from the range and mines. By eleven the milling crowd had grown until it spilled off the sidewalk and all across the street.

Men shook their heads, doubting, angry and bewildered. "He'll never do it," they said. "It's a fake. Someone's running a fast one."

Others said heatedly, "Well, if he does show up we'll string him up to the roof of his own bank!"

As the hour of noon drew close all eyes centered on that announcement. It said:

> At exactly noon today this bank will reopen. Every cent of money is safe. The bank was closed while a panic lasted, to protect itself and its depositors. The panic is over, and the bank is ready again for business. You've seen what runs did to other small banks. Don't start one on your own and break it. Deposit your money instead, and know this bank has never cold-decked you, and never will.
>
> (Signed) JOHN HARKNESS

At three minutes to twelve a tense silence spread through the crowd. At one minute to twelve, a whispering sigh ran through the waiting, staring men. And at twelve noon, on the dot the door of the bank swung open. Standing there, facing them, was John Harkness.

In either hand he held a heavy canvas sack.

A gasp, then gaping unbelieving silence, swept the crowd.

John Harkness smiled. "Gentlemen," his voice rang out, "I'm here, as I told you I would be. Some of you look surprised. Why? Have any of you ever known me to fail to keep my word?"

Someone found his voice suddenly. "There he is! Lynch him! He ran out on us, took our money, he—"

John Harkness lashed back: "You're damn' right I took your money, Joe Hunt! To save it from yourself, and everyone else gone crazy in that panic. Your money's safe, right here in these bags. But it wouldn't be safe today if I'd let you break this bank with a run. You'd have been paid off at less than ten per cent."

Somewhere in the crowd a gun crashed. The bullet showered splinters from the door frame six inches from Harkness' face. He didn't flinch. He laughed.

"Why, Charley," he said, "where did you ever learn to shoot? That was six inches off. Here, I'll move over a little, and you try 'er again."

That did it. A sudden roar of laughter swept the excited crowd.

Someone shouted, "That's talking, John!"

It was big Bill Emery, rancher and power in the community, who cinched it then. His booming voice thundered: "All right, John! You win. Open up your bank, and let me in. I sold my beef herd yesterday, and I got three thousand in cash I aim to deposit."

He turned to the crowd. "John's right, boys! He just does things different than most bankers. By juniper, he up and saved our bank, just by holding it up himself!"

The idea tickled the crowd.

"Boys," Emery shouted, "we'll start a run on this bank, all right, a new kind of run. We'll start a run of *deposits!*"

He strode forward, waving a huge roll of bills like a baton. Others began crowding along behind him, cheering.

An old prospector lifted a small poke bag, shaking it, and piped shrilly: "By cracky, John, let me in that bank! I got some right fresh gold dust here for ye!"

John Harkness grinned. He saw Frank Grable hustling forward, and called to him: "Here, Frank, get back on the job! We got some business to do!"

IT WAS a run, all right—a run of deposits. All afternoon they marched through that little bank, clamoring to deposit whatever money they could get their hands on. By late afternoon John Harkness knew he was wholly out of danger. The money stolen last night was unimportant now; with the bank humming, he could shortly pay back every cent, and no one would ever be the wiser. . . .

When the bank had closed for the day, he sat in his cubby-hole office, looking at the lock of auburn hair coiled in the lid of his watch.

"Well, Mary," he said, "they say there's no fool like an old one. But anyway, it worked!"

He looked up as the office door opened. Sheriff Bart Standish came in, carrying two heavy bags, and one was darkly stained with blood. He dumped the bags on the desk, and looked at John Harkness.

"John," he said, "a deputy from Rawhide just brought these in. They got your name on 'em, and they're full of money. They were found out yonder, beside the body of a gambler named Mort Snaven. John, what does it mean?"

Harkness blinked. Then he grinned. "It means," he said, "that Snaven recognized me last night in Rawhide, figured I had the bank money, and followed me. He held me up, got the money, but I must have hit him with a shot. Seems he died of it before he get very far."

Standish stared. "But those bags you faced the crowd with this morning? You said the bank money was in them."

"Oh, those bags," Harkness said. "I got those and filled them at my house when I got in town this morning."

"Filled them?" Standish demanded. "With what?"

"Sand," John Harkness said, "and some rocks."

The sheriff's eyes spread a little. "You sitting there and telling me you opened the bank today without a red cent in cash?"

"Without money," John Harkness admitted. "But I had something better than money, Bart. I had the trust of men; I had my faith in human nature. It's never let me down before, and it didn't today."

"Of all the hay-wire banking!" the sheriff exploded. And then he sobered. "Well, maybe not so hay-wire at that."

John Harkness nodded. "I'm even sort of glad that money didn't turn up until those folks had a chance to back me. It's sort of a good, warm feelin' to know that I was gamblin' on the winnin' card, all my life."

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Zeb Stillwell was the most gentlemanly—yet the toughest—tenderfoot ever to hit the old Santa Fe trail. His manners, when he was forced to kill, were above reproach. Yet there was that night of red violence in a hell-wild traders' town when he saw another buckskin Bostonian make a last hopeless odds-on fight. . . . And Zeb forgot, for once, to observe his meticulous etiquette in dealing sudden death!

★ By WILLIAM R. COX ★

The second man went down under the tomahawk. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Pilgrims for Savage Empire

CAPTAIN GREGG had decided to go the longer, safer route, following the Arkansas to the mouth of the Picket-Wire and thence up that stream to Trinidad. They had reached the great bend in the Arkansas by June and it was cool enough for Zebulon J. Stillwell to discard his twill coat and don his recently acquired leather hunting shirt and mocassins.

The huge, four-wheeled wagons lumbered along the trail, the oxen plodding in the traces. The double thicknesses of Osnaburg sheeting upon the bows made the wagons seem solid, durable, disguising their skeleton frames now laden with the goods for Santa Fe. It was 1830, and Zeb Stillwell had just passed his twenty-third birthday far from Boston.

He sighed. He was six-feet-three and wide in the shoulders, but his big hands

showed blisters instead of callouses; it seemed as though they would never harden. His pink face was sunburned, not tanned. He rode the big bay horse with ease, but he had learned to ride on his uncle's farm, near Salem. It was the only thing he could do as well as the hardy traders.

Hank Cuff spurred his tall mule and came up beside Zeb. Hank was a veteran at twenty-five. He had deserted the lobster pots of Marblehead at fifteen to run away, and had trapped beaver as far west as the Rockies before he was twenty. He was gaunt and square-shouldered, like the Marblehead men Zeb had rarely seen in Cambridge, at Harvard College.

Hank said, "Captain Gregg says there ain't no use to look for 'em. There's Injun signs."

The homely Massachusetts speech sounded sweet to Zeb's homesick ears. He replied, "But I've got to meet them. That's why I came out here. I must see Jacob House!"

"Captain's got to think about the wagons. Pawnee Rock's the worst place of all. Got to get by."

"How far are we from Pawnee Rock?"

" 'Bout eight miles. Captain figgers to run by fast, in close formation, with guns primed. We'll make camp on the plains, because Injuns are more careful when we're on the plains."

Zeb Stillwell surveyed the Kansas scene with his bright, young blue eyes. The bank of the Arkansas was heavy with deep green foliage. The famed Overland Trail, in its eighth year, had provided little excitement, save that it was so different from the Boston scene . . . .

Boston! Boston and Elspeth, daughter of Jabez Appleton, heir to the foundry fortune, lay far behind. It had taken over a year to learn news of Jacob House.

Zeb repeated, "I must see House! I've got to find out what he has been doing."

Hank scratched his head. It was many a month since Hank had visited a barber. His virile whiskers covered his lantern jaw and the long, fair hair fell to his shoulders. He said, "If House got caught by Pawnees, mebbe you'd better not see him. Mebbe it'd be better to go on to Santa Fe, then go trappin'. That is, if you think you can stand it."

Zeb spread his hands. "They'll toughen. You've gauged my strength. Do you think I could make it?"

"Aye," said Hank promptly and gravely. "You're strong enough. But there's other things—strange sights for a Harvard College man, and strange fodder, sometimes, too. Puppy stew, from friendly Injuns, has saved my life. Not once, but many times."

Zeb Stillwell's young face set in hard lines, his blue eyes darkened. "I came out here to find House—and myself. If I must eat puppies, or snakes—then it must be done."

They rode in silence. Perhaps the dour Puritans had sapped some of the fire from Zeb's heritage. He was sometimes over-serious, even pompous. But these same pioneers had been hard, and the steel had persisted through the generations of ease and wealth of his Tory family's latterly existence.

The wagons creaked along, laden with "coarse and fine fabrics, calicoes, shawls, handkerchiefs, steam-loom shirts and cotton hose," and the "woolen goods, consisting of super blues, stroudings, pelisse cloths, also capes, bombazettes, and some light articles of cutlery, silk shawls and looking glasses" for the gay Mexicans who held Santa Fe as the trade capital in Northern Mexico.

One wagon was Zeb's. In it was all his worldly fortune. Driving it was an old-timer known as Hatfield Charlie, a Kentuckian who had spent his life on the trails leading ever westward, who had eight years before helped to open this route to the setting sun. The caravan approached the elbow of the great bend, and Captain Gregg, bristling with armament, riding his black horse up and down the line, was speeding up the march.

Hank Cuff reined in the mule. He said, "This is where House was to pick us up . . . . Look!"

ZEB peered after the pointing finger, but his city eyes saw nothing against the blue of the June sky. Hank said, "Smoke! There's Injuns out there, sure as all fire! Ten to one they got our friend!"

Zeb's straining glance saw a brief smudge against the horizon. Dimly, it seemed to him that it came from behind a projection, a finger against the skyline.

Hank said, "You can jest see the top of Pawnee Rock. It's kinda hilly in there. If we had enough men we might rescue 'em."

Zeb said, "Enough men? There are fifty of us! Surely that is enough!"

Hank shook his head. "If we left the wagons, what'd happen? You think these men'd leave their fortunes behind?"

Captain Gregg, a stalwart giant with a hawk nose, rode close and said, "Speed up men! Injuns!"

Zeb spurred the bay close to the Captain of the train. He said hastily, "I have reason to believe Jacob House and a party are out there. Were they not to meet us here?"

Gregg snapped, "They were."

"Then the Indians have them. We should go to their aid!" said Zeb fiercely. "They'll be killed!"

"Killed?" The Captain laughed shortly. "Worse! But we can do nothing, Stillwell. I'd advise you to come along swiftly before the Pawnees descend upon us. I expect we shall have to fight them on the plains, at that."

"You refuse to send a rescue party? You'd let House and his friends die?"

Gregg said, in more kindly accents, "You're new out here, Stillwell. You don't understand. It's impossible to send men out and do away quickly with a band of Pawnees. It would mean a long battle, and the possible loss of our goods as well. House knew his chances. He's been out here long enough. I regret it if he is captured—but he knows we can do nothing."

Zeb cried, "This is impossible! I have heard of Indian tortures! You'd desert him to that?"

Gregg shrugged. He looked meaningly at Hank and said, "Explain to your pardner, Cuff. I haven't time now."

He saluted Zeb courteously and rode away towards the head of the line. They were speeding up now, even the oxen lumbering at a swifter pace. The riders were on the alert, their guns capped and primed, watching each thicket, an advance guard strung out ahead. Excitement ran up and down the caravan, and also an urgent haste to get away from that place.

Zeb sat upon the bay and watched incredulously. Hank was silent, but he made no effort to follow the others.

Zeb said. "It can't be! Certainly they must do something."

"I know it ain't no use to explain to you." Hank answered slowly. "You're Boston. But Gregg's right."

Zeb said, "I'm going after House! I'm going to that smoke. They might be burning him at the stake!"

"They don't burn them at the stake," said Hank calmly. "Not the Pawnees."

"I've heard that they—"

"—do worse than that," said Hank gently. "They do."

"I'm going, I tell you," cried Zeb. "I have got to see House. I have a message for him. And I must join him in an expedition!"

Hank said, "Wa'all—if you're determined . . . ."

He shifted a large dragoon revolver to his belt. He made sure of his long-barreled rifle. He produced a hunting knife of exceeding heft and sharpness and strung it handy to his reach. He carefully unfastened a large pack from his saddle and placed it under a thicket.

Zeb numbly followed suit. Hank remounted the ungainly but swift and durable mule and said, "It ain't gonna be a picnic. But I cain't let one Boston man go arter another alone!"

The two young men sat for an instant, watching the last dust of the wagon train as it rolled away from Indian signs. Then they turned and rode across country, towards the hillock of sandstone which was Pawnee Rock.

And with Zebulon J. Stillwell rode the ghost of an evening in Boston; an hour when his life had revolved as in a kaleidoscope and had spilled him all unwitting into this wild Western country of strange ideals and ideas . . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Tomahawk from Boston

THE snow drifted in little eddies along Commonwealth Avenue. The tall, narrow house gave off light through a frosted fan-light above the tall

narrow door. Zebulon J. Stillwell unloosed the frogs of his greatcoat and mounted the high stoop, stomping the snow from his overshoes. A tight-faced middle-aged servant was impolite to him in the hallway.

But Elspeth was gracious and slim and pretty. Elspeth gave him her hand and stared up into his face and murmured nothings about his welfare. There was hot tea with scones.

"You wanted to tell me something, Elspeth?"

She arose and swept to the doorway, sure that her father was gone above stairs. She returned and sat very straight upon the sofa, her hands clasped in her lap.

She had dark eyes and her hair was gathered in a great knot upon the back of her head, drawn severely from the white oval of her face.

She said abruptly, "It's about Jacob House."

"You've heard from him? How is he doing in the West?" inquired Zeb. He made his voice steady, but he knew that Jacob House was his closest rival here.

"I've not heard from him. Not in two years." Her voice was low. "Zebulon .... I cannot give you an answer until I know if he means to return."

The coal in the fireplace crackled in the grate. Then Zeb said, "So it is like that, Elspeth?"

Her hands twisted helplessly. "I am not saying that I do not love you. But before Jacob left I promised him that I would wait. You would not have me hold such a promise lightly?"

Zeb said, "You love him. He has gone away and never written, but you cannot forget him."

"He was a man!" she cried. "A strong, violent man, perhaps. But he had courage and intelligence. He would have been a great success, had he stayed in Boston. He could have taken care of me."

She stopped, biting her lip. Her face narrowed a little. She said, "I know you are well-to-do, Zebulon. Your mother was left a sizable fortune. But you do nothing. You teach at times, that logic and ethics of yours. You speak well, you conduct yourself as a gentleman should. But someone must take over the foundry when father—when the time comes. Can you imagine yourself in a foundry, Zebulon?"

He took a step forward on the rug from the Orient which Jabez Appleton had bought from a trader in the China Seas.

"If Jacob was dead?" he asked. "Or if—he no longer cared?"

"I—I must know," she cried.

"If I were to join him, wherever he is—if I were to learn about him, would you believe me?"

She said, "Join him? You mean go out there, where the Indians scalp people? *You?*" She laughed.

Zeb said, "You love him. I love you. There is but one thing to do."

"You—you would not dare!"

"I can start almost at once," he mused. "It is a big country, they say. But as yet there are few people in it. A man from California had word of Jacob last spring. He was trapping beaver in the Rockies. The man said he was making money."

"You never told me?" she cried. "You held it back from me!"

Zeb nodded calmly. "In love, one does not concede tricks. However, when it's decided by the woman that such a course is necessary—that is different."

"You will go, then? You will tell him that I'm still waiting? You will do this for me?" The color spread on her cheeks, but her dark eyes weighed him, calculating.

Zeb said, "I will do it—for myself. Because there is no peace for me, no possible happiness, until I find out."

She said, as steadily as he had spoken, "Very well. You shall go, then. And my word, Zebulon, that whichever way it turns out, you shall be fairly treated."

He bowed. "That is all any man can ask. I will find Jacob, talk with him, tell him that you love him. If he will come, I shall bring him to you. As to the rest—it will be in the hands of God."

She arose and held out her hands, crying, "For this, Zebulon, you shall always be remembered. In my heart there will always be a place for such a man!"

He picked his coat from the rack in the hall. Somehow, Elspeth had faded and was already in the past. He said, "Please, this is not entirely altruism. This is the result of an impasse. Do not hold me too highly—just remember that I love you."

Their hands met. He struggled into

the cloak and went out through the narrow door onto the long street. Elspeth stood watching him, but the wind was too strong, and she went almost at once. He had one last glimpse of her, and then the night was about him and Boston was white-clad in winter's grip. There was nothing to it but to walk.

Away back yonder, looking over the river, was Harvard College. Perhaps Elspeth was right. Perhaps he had been too cloistered. His mother had destined him for the cloth, but he had escaped that. Then the friendly halls of learning had claimed him, and he had stayed to tutor, later to teach. He had even been toying with the idea of a professorship, next year.

Friendly, lazy college halls! He was swapping them, as his forbears had swapped with the Indians. He was going away. Even though his mind was made up, though he knew that he must go—had known it for months, underneath, by Elspeth's sighing for Jacob House—he could scarcely believe that the die was cast, that his word was now irrevocably given.

He took one last look as he walked back, remembering the familiar outlines of the snug buildings, the spacious streets of Boston.

The watch cried out, "Ten o'clock and all's well," and he turned into Beacon Street and felt in his heart that all was far from well. . . .

THE oldtimers had laughed secretly at his tomahawk, but the weapon hefted well in Zeb Stillwell's hand. He thrust it into his belt. He had a pair of heavy pistols and a rifle which Hank had made him buy and which was rather long in the barrel for him, accustomed as he was to fowling pieces of the East. But it was accurate, he had found.

Zeb was not a bad shot, even Hank conceded. Hank, who had been brought up to aim at a squirrel's eyes back in the hills around Marblehead, had become phenomenally accurate and unbelievably fast at reloading. They looked carefully to their arms, and Hank's sober mien did nothing to allay the rising alarm that clutched at Zeb's throat.

He felt very much alone, now that the wagon train was out of sight. The sandstone rock looked forbidding, and the stream of black smoke was an unseen menace.

Hank said, "There's lots of things about Injuns. They like to s'prise people. And when they're s'prised, they gen'rally run like hell. We got a chance, if there ain't too many."

"We can climb the rock," said Zeb. "We might get them from long range with our rifles."

"Accordin' to how many there are," said Hank. "If it's a party of young braves, mebbeso. Otherwise . . . ."

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"Have you another scheme?" demanded Zeb.

"Only t' die with a Massachusetts man," grinned Hank. "Unless I can run fast enough to get away."

Zeb and Hank had met in Independence, and it was Hank who had word of Jacob House. Hank and Jacob had trapped the same country for beaver, and had fought Indians together. Their paths had parted, but they were to meet this June when the wagon-train of Gregg and his company came to the Arkansas, bound for Santa Fe.

In Hank there was something which Zeb had never before found in a man. The scholarly background of Harvard had not produced as competent a friend, as staunch a partner. It must have been difficult for Hank to put up with Zeb, but he had been the soul of patience.

Zeb was green, and his wanderings on the near frontier had taught him little. He was stiff and unyielding in argument, quick to take offense. The Border bully, Olaf Hansen, a great Swede, took umbrage one night in a tavern.

Zeb would never forget that night. The Swede came at him with outstretched, huge talons, yowling blasphemies, bent on tearing Zeb to pieces. Chairs and tables went over and men cleared a space to watch the fun.

Zeb fought standing straight up, English fashion. His timed, clean-cut blows drove the Swede back against the wall again and again, and each time Olaf came roaring back, bleeding, but no whit discouraged. Zeb's knuckles cracked, and his left became useless.

Olaf came in then, his eyes gleaming through the puffing which Zeb's punches had raised. He got one big arm about Zeb's body, and with his other hand he reached for Zeb's blue eyes, intent upon gouging them out.

The fear arose, then. For the first time in his life, Zeb Stillwell was afraid. The prodding thumb was on his eyeball, and he knew that in a moment he would be blinded for life.

His knee came up without volition. It banged into the Swede's stomach. The thumb retreated; Olaf screamed with pain. Zeb kicked hard with his copper-toed shoe. He got home on shin bone and the Swede redoubled his efforts in a frenzy of pain, regaining his dangerous grip. In a moment it would be over.

The lights of the tavern went out, then. Zeb slammed his knee upward once more. The Swede yowled, but his grip slackened. Then, before Zeb could do more, there was the sound of a thudding blow. Olaf relaxed, his grip broken.

Zeb staggered to his feet, shaken and dizzy. An arm went about him. He was half-carried out of the tavern. Before he knew what it was about, he was upon a mule, being held firmly by strong hands. It was almost an hour, and they were far along when he was able to make himself known to Hank Cuff.

When he tried to stammer thanks, Hank only said, "I was watchin' you. I seen you was a Massachusetts man. Couldn't let a Swede gouge you, could I?"

NOW, riding towards Pawnee Rock in search of Jacob House, Zeb stole a glance at the lanky man astride the mule. Hank's face was composed. He was not eager, nor was he frightened. There was about him an inherited curiosity and a dogged fearlessness. He was not rashly brave, Zeb knew. He was cautious, but he was courageous, with a high and shining courage.

Zeb sighed, looking within himself. He had come to fight for Jacob House for reasons of his own. Without certain knowledge of House, there could be nothing of interest for him in life. Upon his meeting with House hinged his relationship with Elspeth. To him that was paramount.

But he had dragged Hank Cuff into it! And without Hank, he would be helpless, not knowing how to proceed. He almost checked his horse, calling to Hank to turn back, to abandon the foolish attempt.

Hank said suddenly, "Reckon I couldn't leave old Jake, at that. Reckon I'd come alone, if you didn't elect for it."

Zeb demanded, "Can you read my thoughts, Hank?"

The lean man stole a sideways look at his companion. "Nope. But I know what I'd be thinkin', if I was you. Forget it, pardner. Me and Jake been closer'n tics

to a steer. Let's speed up. Got to make that hill right quick, I'm afeered."

The column of smoke seemed to grow thicker, blacker. The horse and the mule sped across the plain. The sandy ground slowed them as they approached Pawnee Rock, but they came quickly enough to the foot of the slope.

From his saddle, Hank produced two curiously twisted ends of rope. He secured one of them to the front legs of the mule, the other to the bay horse. "Hobbles," he explained tersely. "Get 'em off in a minute and the nags won't get away. This stock don't stand tied very good. Let's go up."

It was not easy to follow Hank through the rocky country. Zeb's walking muscles stood him in good stead, but he was puffing from the pace Hank set for him when they came to the brow of the hill. He was twenty yards behind when Hank put back his hand, motioning for silence.

Zeb crawled the rest of the way. Hank had ensconced himself behind a pile of red rock. They were on the brow of a small hill, looking down into a valley. The smoke was quite close now—too close.

Zeb started, and the hands upon his gun went weak for the moment, and inside him his stomach did queer things. They were almost above the scene. He had an excellent view.

The Indians were painted in strange fashion. They were apparently quite happy. Some of them were dancing, a flat, awkward shuffle, their beady eyes eager, staring always at the man upon the ground.

Three stood near the man's head, bending close, exulting. As Zeb's fascinated eyes clung unwillingly to the horrid sight, the man's mouth opened and pent-up screams burst forth, pealing like the cry of a soul in torment, scarcely human.

They had staked him out, a peg at each limb. They had cut upon him with knives, and his naked body was maculated with blood. Some of the blood was dry, proving that they had worked on him for some time without making him cry out. He was a large man, and quite hairy.

That is, he had been hairy. They had made incision for scalping him, without lifting his hair. And, with their fiendish humor, they had marked him further.

They planned to take a scalp from his hirsute chest. Already he was half-flayed by their keen blades, the skin was lifted from his ribs, so that the raw flesh showed.

Hank whispered in his ear, "I count ten of 'em. Look! There's Jake!"

The victim, then, was not Jacob House. Zeb tore his eyes away from the suffering man on the ground. Jacob House was tied to a lone tree which stood gaunt in that sparse land.

The Pawnee had tied Jake securely enough. He wore a beard, so that Zeb would never have known him, and the visible parts of his face were white and streaming with sweat as he held his head erect and stared at the leering Indians who taunted him. He had grown wider and taller since Boston days, Zeb thought.

The Pawnees were beside themselves with pleasure. Two were gathering little faggots. The others cavorted, back and forth between the captive, gloating in the torture they were inflicting. Hank whispered,

"They're young 'uns. Haven't had much experience. Injuns only torture when they're happy and got time. These braves are takin' a chance so near the Trail, but they figger they got to make big coup. Account of they're young."

Zeb said thickly, "We must do something. Quick!"

"Cain't save Paddy," said Hank. His eyes were somber, but his voice was heavy. "No chance to sneak up and let Jake loose. I dunno."

The two Indians with the twigs placed them upon the prone man's belly. Before Zeb's horrified gaze they snatched a torch from the fire and thrust it close. The dry faggots caught and again the man screamed his agony to the unfeeling sky.

Zeb acted without volition. His rifle went to his shoulder. Before Hank could restrain him. he had fired.

He peered eagerly through the smoke. The Indians had stopped, petrified for one instant. One who appeared to be the leader stepped forward, staring bug-eyed towards the rocks.

The man on the ground stopped screaming. Zeb's bullet had taken effect. Hank, cursing for once, shouted, "Why in tarnation did you shoot?"

"He was suffering so . . . ." Zeb panted.

Hank's own rifle cracked. The chief, who had moved, dropped on his face. In a moment the Indians had seized bows and arrows and were making for the ponies which they had tethered nearby. Zeb looked again at the dead man on the ground. His mercy shot had struck the tortured chap in the head. It had been a very good downhill shot, Zeb thought numbly.

He had his piece loaded. He shot very carefully at an Indian. The brave fell, twisted on the ground, then leaped up. Hank muttered, never stopping his steady fire,

"You got to hit 'em plumb center to kill 'em. Tougher'n whales, they be."

Zeb fired again. A big buck toppled from his pony. Hank accounted for one, then they were riding in a circle. They did not run away, but rode around the rocks, trying to get behind the two who attacked them. There were six of them left—odds of three to one.

Suddenly one left the circle. He had a tomahawk in his hand and he was screeching like a banshee. He rode straight down, over the bodies of his companions, of the tortured man. He cocked his arm, aiming the hatchet.

Jacob House threw back his head. He could not move, could not evade the deadly weapon. The Pawnees were not going to allow one of their captives to escape—this would be the greatest possible disgrace.

Zeb leaped from his rock. Arrows from the riders zinged past him with a peculiar whistling sound. The brave who threatened Jacob had caught Zeb with his rifle unloaded.

Hank cursed again, but directed his fire upon the warriors closing in upon Zeb. The rider with the tomahawk poised his weapon to despatch Jacob with one stroke.

Zeb's hand found his own hatchet. He plucked it forth, leaned back. With all his force he threw it, then ran blindly after it, calling, "Courage, Jacob! Here I come!"

An arrow went through his leather jacket. Zeb never deviated a step from his course. He saw his thrown tomahawk catch the Indian in the small of the back. He ran swiftly. The brave fell from the horse. Zeb retrieved his weapon. The brave, dying, made a sporadic effort. A knife gleamed, aimed at Zeb's throat.

Jacob's voice cried hoarsely, "Look out!"

Zeb threw himself sideways. The knife grazed his shoulder. He reversed the tomahawk and clubbed hard. He felt the skull of the redskin crumple as it went home.

Then he was scrambling towards the tree. The rawhide thongs were tight against the dead bark. Quick blows cut them through and Jacob fell limply to the ground.

Hank was yelling, "To me! Bring him here!"

It was good sense. The rocks were their only haven. Hank's fire was miraculously rapid, but the Pawnee could shoot their arrows much swifter, if with less accuracy. Zeb remembered to keep moving. He got Jacob across his shoulders and ran zig-zag to where Hank covered them.

The Pawnees, only four of them now, made a desperate attempt. They came riding straight, in a direct attack. Hank arose, a pistol in each hand. Zeb ran as fast as he could, staggering under the burden of Jacob House.

Hank's heavy guns barked. The Pawnees hesitated for one split instant. Hank fired once from the rifle, which he had by some miracle reloaded. Two Indians remained.

They turned and fled. The fight was over.

CHAPTER THREE

On to Santa Fe!

JACOB HOUSE repeated, "Zeb! Zeb Stillwell, from Boston! It just isn't possible."

He was already recovered. It was scarcely an hour since the Indians had retreated, but Jacob was leaning against one of the Indian ponies which Hank had captured with difficulty. His face was tanned and lined and he seemed years older than he should, but at least he was recognizable.

Hank said, "We'll dig a grave right beside Paddy and roll him in. You want to scalp these Pawnees, Jake?"

"By God, yes!" snapped Jacob. "Poor Paddy—he was a brave man!"

Hank took out a small, sharp skinning

knife and seized the scalplock of the nearest dead Pawnee. Zeb cried, "Surely you do not follow that grisly custom!"

"You do not understand," said Jacob grimly. "The Indians believe that as a corpse is buried, so it will reappear in the Happy Hunting Grounds. To be scalped is the worst humiliation of all. Imagine walking around heaven without your hair!" There was a grim smile on Jacob's mouth.

Zeb said, "You've grown hard, Jacob."

"This is a hard country," said Jacob patiently. "These Pawnees must be taught a lesson. We've made treaties with the Kaws and Osages in the Southwest. The Pawnees must learn that they cannot molest the wagon trains or the West will never be opened!"

Hank was busy about his gloomy tasks. Zeb quickly said, "Jacob, I came out here to bring you a message. It is from Elspeth."

Jacob House stroked the mane of the Indian pony. There was no saddle upon the beast, only a blanket and surcingle. He said slowly, "Elspeth! Why—er—what does she say?"

Zeb choked, then went on. "She still loves you. That is, she wants to hear from you. She wants you to return to Boston. She promised to wait. And she is still waiting."

There was a moment's silence. Hank dug with the large knife, making hard work of it.

Jacob House said, "Ah. Yes. There was that between us. But you love her, Zeb. Why don't you marry her?"

"She did not think me man enough," said Zeb quietly. "And the truth to tell, I did not know myself if I was man enough. So I came here to find you, and if you could not return at once, to stay with you until you could. I have a wagon in the train of Captain Gregg. I am willing, if you must, to go to Santa Fe and wind up your business."

Jacob House's eyes lightened. He said, "Now that is an idea of worth! Zeb, you shall do just that. You shall come to Santa Fe. I do indeed have business there, and one not so easily wound up."

Zeb said, "I will be glad to accompany you. Elspeth is prepared to wait for us. I tell you frankly, when we return, I'll consider myself still in the lists. But until then—shall we be partners—along with Hank?"

Jacob held out his hand. It was a very powerful, very thorny hand. It was not the hand of a Harvard College man. Zeb winced a little under its grip.

Jacob said, "Well spoken, Zeb! And you couldn't have picked a better man than Hank Cuff. Shall we lend him a hand in his unpleasant job?"

Even as they worked, it seemed that Jacob had become gayer. In Boston he had been a thwarted, morose giant. He was bigger than Zeb, with sloping shoulders and thick legs, slower moving, perhaps, but powerful as a bull. He told them how the Pawnees had surrounded them and after several Indians had been killed, the remainder had closed in and battered Paddy Mullins and Jacob unconscious with their war clubs.

"They wanted to have their fun with us," he concluded. "Of course we should have killed ourselves when we saw that it was hopeless. We knew what to expect—but even though we were aware that Gregg could not save us, there was that hope. A man learns to cling to the smallest straw out here. And—you see—you came!"

Hank said gruffly, "Ye can thank Zeb."

"Indeed not! Hank would have come alone! He admitted it!" cried Zeb, so that Jacob laughed at them, and the rocky hill echoed their mirth.

They were riding towards the trail before Zeb remembered how they had laughed in the presence of the dead. In Boston, he thought, this would have been desecration beyond bearing. In Boston he would have objected most strenuously this seeming callousness towards death and its dignity.

It was then that Zeb Stillwell first decided that death had little dignity. The maimed body of Paddy Mullins was certainly without dignity. The sprawled, grinning dead faces of the Pawnees had been like masks in a pageant. Zeb shrugged and his lips tightened. He was learning about the frontier. He was learning its swift, bitter lessons.

Hank said, "We can ketch the wagons tonight. How's the Injun pony, Jake?"

The pony was short but wiry. Jacob let

his legs dangle and drawled, "She'll do. But let's not hurry. Let's camp and catch the train in the morning. I'm—a bit tuckered."

Zeb said, "I don't see how you move at all. You must have been tied up for hours."

"Yes," said Jacob. A shadow passed across his dark eyes. "But that was nothing. I'm tough enough. It was watching the devils work over Paddy. I'm a bit sick inside. I've seen results of their handiwork, but never have I had a friend in that fix."

"I'm glad I shot him," exclaimed Zeb.

"It was a foolish thing to do," said Jacob gravely. "We might all have been killed. But it was a mercy, and it was brave."

He did not again mention the rescue, but Zeb felt satisfied that he had done well. The three rode along the trail, into the prairie country, down to the river. It was spreading, unending country, such as Zeb had never dreamed. The horizon was upon another land, it seemed. They rode in silence until nightfall, but meantime Hank had shot a turkey.

They made camp and were bold to show a fire and cook the wild fowl. Hank had salt in the pack he had rescued from under the bush, back at Pawnee Rock. The fat fowl was savory and Zeb had never tasted anything so luscious as the drumstick and wing which were alloted to him.

Grey wolves howled about them as the hours passed and Hank and Jacob talked. Despite their weariness, they did not sleep at once. Hank was to stand first watch and the others were loth to leave him awake alone.

Zeb listened. It seemed to him that these two spoke a different language. Their accents were of Massachusetts, but their words were strange. They spoke of the beaver, and where they had trapped him, in the mountains, the Great Rockies to the west, almost virgin territory where even the Indians had been too lazy to penetrate.

They spoke of battles with grizzlies, of other Indian fights, of great marches, of freezing and sweltering on the trails of that hard country. And as they spoke, their eyes kindled and they vied with one another in describing their hardships.

Jacob cried, "I've gold enough on deposit in Santa Fe to keep me two lifetimes! I've wrested a fortune from it! But how can a man leave it?"

"Leave it?" chuckled Hank. "Leave the western land? Not me. I've not a farthing to show for myself. I got cleaned out by the gamblers in Kansas City. Twenty thousand dollars, I lost, and me drunk as a fiddler's dog. But if I had a million, I'd stay here and follow the trails. Marblehead would be a dull hole after this!"

Jacob said shortly, "Ah! Yes. I'm for sleep, now!"

It was as if he had said too much and regretted having spoken. He rolled up in one of Hank's blankets and stretched on the ground. Zeb Stillwell sat hunched beside the fire.

So Jacob did not want to go back! That meant, perhaps, that Elspeth would change her mind. Perhaps when they confronted her and Jacob spoke of the hardships of the frontier, Elspeth would not care to return. She would turn then to Zeb, for he knew Elspeth would never leave her beloved Boston. . . .

THEY were at the hundredth meridian when Captain Gregg said, "This is where we follow the new trail to the mouth of Picket-Wire. Anyone still want to chance the plains?"

Old Hatfield Charlie said, "I'd rather take an extry month and fight Injuns than go thirsty."

Jacob House agreed. "We've time. We haven't lost a wagon nor a man. Captain Gregg is right. Follow the water."

The motley crew which formed the caravan of traders concurred. The march went on up the Arkansas. Jacob was a man of influence among them, Zeb had found. They listened to him as they did to Captain Gregg, with respect.

The weeks went by with dramatic swiftness. Zeb never tired of staring at the strange, new country through which they progressed.

Riding down towards Las Vegas, Jacob spurred the horse he had bought from one of the traders until he was beside Zeb's bay. He said, "The Spaniards are a different people from us, Zeb."

"So I have heard," said Zeb dryly. He had grown hard and brown, helping

with the wagons, spelling old Hatfield, now and then fighting sporadic battles with Indians.

Jacob said. "I get along well with them, except for one. There is a certain Don Firencon . . . . But that is another tale. If you will make up your mind to like them before you get to Santa Fe, you will be better off."

Zeb laughed. "Have no fears. The trail has changed me, also."

"I hope so," said Jacob. "Zeb, we have become good friends. I will never forget how bravely you ran to save me back at Pawnee Rock. I know what it must have cost you, a scholarly man, to come out to this country. Never feel too badly towards me, will you, Zeb?"

"Of course not," said Zeb, mystified. "Whatever makes you talk so?"

"I'm pulling out ahead, now," said Jacob. There is no further danger of Indians. I have no stake in this venture, you know. I joined with the train to make the trip, but my business lies in Santa Fe. I've been away almost a year, and now I must make all haste to return."

Zeb said, "Well! We will see you there, of course."

"Of course," said Jacob.

He nodded with dignity and rode rapidly ahead of the caravan. He spoke briefly to Captain Gregg, and was gone.

Hank Cuff rode up and said, "Ol' Jake's in a powerful hurry. You see the Injun come in last night?"

Zeb said, "What Indian?"

"A rider from Santa Fe," said Hank carelessly. A friendly. Had a message for ol' Jake."

"Jacob mentioned trouble with a Spaniard. A man named Firencon," said Zeb puzzedly. "Why didn't he ask us to go along?"

"Men mostly try to manage their own affairs, out thisaway," said Hank.

Zeb rode awhile in silence. Then he spurred up to where Captain Gregg still led the van. Hank stayed at his shoulder.

Zeb said, "Captain, would you take it amiss if Hank and I rode on after Jacob House?"

Gregg glanced at them, then looked away. He said slowly, "It would not affect me. But you have a wagon of goods to trade, Stillwell."

Hank drawled, "I was hopin' you'd explain that to him."

"I don't understand," said Zeb impatiently. "Jacob said there was no further danger of Indian trouble . . . ."

Gregg shook his head. "It's not that. You're a friend of House's. He has a very powerful enemy in Santa Fe. This man has threatened him. There will be a fight—bad trouble, perhaps. If you take sides against the Spaniard, you will put yourself against the people of the country."

"But Jacob dares to . . . ."

"Jake's been around," said Hank. "Jake's practically a Spanish himself. He stands good, and why not? It's a family fight with old Jake . . . ."

Gregg cut in, "It's your own business, Stillwell. I just want to make it clear to you that trading with these people is very profitable. A few trips like this and a man can retire. Anything you do to spoil good relations will act against us all."

Zeb said, "But you say this man is powerful, this Don Firencon. What if Jacob is in danger?"

"You rescued him once," said Gregg dryly. "This time I think you can leave him to his own devices."

Zeb flushed and fell back, but Hank stayed, talking earnestly to Gregg.

THE company meandered down the road, under the Northern Mexican sun.

Hank dropped back and rode beside him again. Hank's face was serious. He said, "Jake left word with Gregg that if he was killed, you were to be executor of his estate. There's a will filed with the Bishop in Santa Fe."

Zeb said, "If he were killed? Hank—that's enough! We're riding ahead!"

Hank drawled, "I ain't tradin', you know. I'm aimin' to trap the Rockies. It's no skin off my nose."

"I don't care," said Zeb. His stubborn jaw set in a bulldog pattern. "I came out here to stand by Jacob, to take him home. I'm riding."

It came to him rudely even as he started towards Gregg that this was the first time he had mentioned "home" in days—weeks. With a further shock he knew that

in that time he had scarcely thought of Elspeth.

He said to Gregg, "I will try not to compromise you. May we say that my wagon belongs to Hatfield Charlie? Then, if anything happens, you will not be embarrassed."

Gregg nodded. He smiled, for once, and replied, "Somehow I was hoping you'd go. We need Jacob House in this country. He is a good man. I will disown you, the traders will do nothing for you if you get into trouble. But, by all means, go!"

Hank grinned broadly as they left.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fighting Men Without a Chance!

THE squat, one-storied buildings were unimpressive in the dimness, with only the flickering lamplight shining through square windows to illuminate Santa Fe. The one two-storied shingle-roofed house in town belonged to the Bishop of the diocese, Hank said.

They stood in the public square, in the center of town, in the shadow of the left wing of the governor's palace, a long, low structure with painted white walls. Across from them one larger building was full of sound and motion, lighted in every corner. Liquid Spanish emanated from this place, many voices speaking at once.

Hank said, "They're gettin' ready for the wagon train. There's a nightly fandango, and tomorrow they'll be puttin' on a big shindig for the traders. The señoritas will be flashin' their Sunday best tomorrow.

"You don't know nothin' till you've danced with a Spanish gal," said Hank enthusiastically. "None of that stand-off, down-East stuff. Warm, they are!"

Zeb said hastily, "We should locate Jacob at once. Even now he may be in trouble."

"That'll be easy," said Hank. "I got a friend."

He dragged Zeb after him, making for the lighted building. Through a window the two stared inside. A violin played, castanets clicked. Zeb stared, unbelieving, at the bedecked throng as the movement of the fandango began.

The girls had night-dark hair and were startingly graceful. They were full-bosomed, yet their waists were caught tight by sashes of brilliant hue, such slim waists as could be spanned by a man's hands. Their feet were tiny, twinkling in the steps of the dance, and their dark eyes gleamed provocatively at their slick-haired partners.

The men were short, for the most part, but wiry and exceedingly virile in appearance. Their olive skin was clear and their brown eyes large and bold.

Hank said, "There! There's Conchita!"

He pressed his face closer, so that the light from the interior fell upon it. The girl swirling by was buxom and beautiful. Her glance fell upon Hank's bearded face. Her eyes flashed once, with such brilliance that Zeb started in amazement. Then she proceeded with the dance.

"She evidently is afraid to recognize you," said Zeb drily.

Hank chuckled. "You hide behind the corner of that house and watch."

The music of the wild waltz ended. Hank leaned against the wall of a mud house, his arms folded.

Moments passed. Then, from a side door, a figure crept, wrapped in mantilla and shawl. The girl sped across the lighted area, hesitated. She espied Hank. She started forward again, throwing her shawl wide, leaping. Her arms went about Hank's unclean neck, her body pushed against him in an embrace which made Zeb's senses reel.

Hank spoke to her in her own language. She rattled in answer, a long harangue entirely indistinguishable to Zeb. Then Hank seized her, kissed her fiercely and sent her running back before she should be missed by her friends.

As the girl entered the side door, a party came out at the front. There were three men, caped and sinister-seeming. Hank slipped close and said, "Around the building! Watch those hombres."

The two went around the mud house, playing hide and seek. The three men, sticking together, made a cursory round of the dance hall. They stood for a moment on the square.

Hank said, "Conchita really knows somethin'. Those three are Don Firencon's men. They're more or less expectin' us. Jake's in the calaboose.

"Firencon had him arrested on a charge of treason agin' Spain. Jake is supposed to be raisin' an army to take over this section for the United States. The government is scared all the time that it's really goin' to happen. Firencon is tryin' to get Jacob's goods confiscated."

"Where is the jail?" demanded Zeb.

"It ain't that simple," said Hank slowly. "If we get him out, where we goin'? This is Spanish country. They'll be after us. We'd never get away."

Zeb said, "Tomorrow or next day the wagons will be in. Could we do it then?"

"Unless somethin' happens, we got to warn the wagons to stay out," said Hank. "Conchita says Firencon accused Gregg and the traders, too."

"What chance have we, then?" demanded Zeb. "What will happen to Jacob?"

"He's to be shot in the morning," said Hank. "We ain't got much chance."

THEY stood, watching the three men in front of the dance hall. A tall, handsome chap in slashed velveteen trousers and a scarlet sash came out of the building and spoke. The three turned and went inside. The handsome man came leisurely toward the spot where Hank and Zeb were hiding.

Hank whispered, "Don Firencon! Quick!"

They ducked back, crowding into a corner where a shadow concealed them. As soon as the Don was beyond the circle of light, his demeanor changed. Tossing aside his cheroot, he doubled his pace. He went past the shadow without glancing right or left. He proceeded along the square, turned in between two houses where there were no lights.

Hank leaped forward, staring. Under his breath he counted, pointing off the houses one by one.

"What?" demanded Zeb. "Where did he go?"

"Come on, and make no noise!"

He led the way, around in back of the houses which faced on the plaza. A pig squealed up from under their feet, but they went on.

They made two turns, and Zeb was

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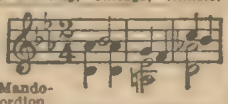

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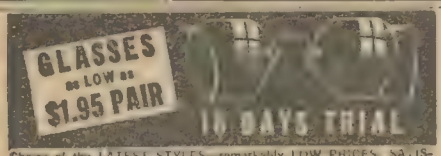

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confused. Hank stopped and counted houses. He pointed at a dimly lighted window. He said, "That's the house. There was no light there when we looked before."

"What is it?" asked Zeb. "What are you searching for?"

"That's what we're goin' to find out," said Hank. "Come on!"

They crept close to the house, their moccasins making no sound. It was a house in no way different from its baked-mud fellows. The window looked in upon a living room.

The voice of Don Firencon came through, speaking rapidly. It was a heavy voice, pregnant with some emotion which Zeb could not distinguish. It was laden with a hot passion, whether anger or not, Zeb could not determine.

Hank stayed very still, listening. Zeb became uncomfortable and shifted his position. As he did, his glance was directed behind him.

The three figures were creeping, cloaked and silent, coming the way Zeb and Hank had come. Zeb dropped flat and hissed, using the snake call which Zeb and Jacob had agreed would be their danger signal in the woods along the Santa Fe trail. The three men came swifter, and in the starlight Zeb could see the steel flashing in their hands.

His tomahawk was handy in his belt. In the other hand Zeb held the hunting knife which he had taken from a fallen Pawnee brave. The three men were intent upon Hank.

Zeb wouldn't have known what to do in Boston, but now his mind worked like a clock. He rolled over in the dirt.

Hank had not moved from his listening attitude. For a moment Zeb thought Hank had not heard his signal. Then he realized that it was better for Hank to pretend ignorance, to allow Zeb to act.

The three came on as one, sticking close together.

Zeb waited, counting his heartbeats. They came opposite his position. He let them get past him. Then he leaped, uncoiling his long, powerful legs, silently.

He dimly saw Hank, moving with terrific speed, coming away from the window. The timing was perfect. As one man

opened his mouth to yell, Zeb's knife neatly slit the jugular.

The second man went down under the tomahawk as noiselessly. Zeb wheeled, but Hank was already at hand. The third man tried to run, but Hank had him by the throat, stifling any sound. Hank's quick knife stabbed once, twice.

Zeb poised, watching the window. If Don Firencon had heard, if he came to look, there would be another dead man in Santa Fe that night. The polished gentleman from Harvard's halls of learning held the red-stained tomahawk in one hand, the soiled knife in the other. He strained forward, ready to throw either one.

The droning voice went on and on. Hank said, "This is bad. Zeb. It'd be better if we could gather some witnesses to what Firencon's sayin'. But now I guess we better get Jake outa that jail. It'll be a desperate chance, but I think we got somethin' that'll help us."

"But you said there was no chance of getting away!" said Zeb.

"We ain't goin' to get away," said Hank. "We're goin' to stay and give 'em hell!"

THE jail was behind the Governor's palace. There was a soldier on guard in front. The man had a rifle and walked up and down very wearily.

"There's more soldiers inside," said Hank. "But these mud buildings ain't what you might call sturdy. Now, if we can locate Jake."

They prowled the rear of the jail. There were barred windows, very small and high up. It was impossible to see within.

Hank stooped and said, "Give me a foot."

Zeb put his toe in Hank's hands. Hank lifted. Zeb peered through one of the windows. On the floor lay a huddled figure wrapped in a serape. It was obviously not Jacob House.

There was a corridor, dimly lighted. The cells were built on a square. Zeb could not determine how many there were, but there seemed to be no night patrol of the corridor.

He dropped to earth and reported to Hank. They moved to the next window. At the third attempt Zeb espied a big

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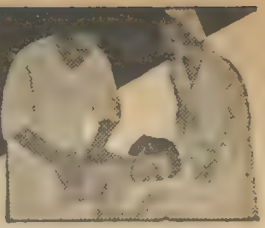

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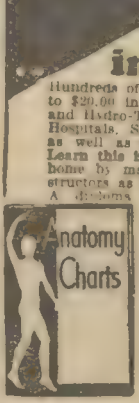

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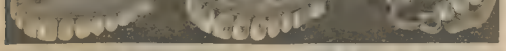

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man, with a beard lying on a rude cot. Zeb hissed like a snake.

The man did not move. But from the cot came an answering signal. Zeb whispered, "It's Hank and me."

Still without moving, Jacob whispered back, "It's no use. He's got me cold."

Zeb said, "We're taking you out."

He dropped down. He drew his tomahawk and muttered, "Mud walls!"

Hank grabbed his arm. "The knife," he whispered. "They'd hear the blows of the hatchet. Dig!"

They dug. Their muscles stood out like cords with their haste lest someone come. They dug into the spaces between the mud bricks, then pried out the bricks carefully, placing them on the ground. Soon Jacob's head came through and he whispered, "This is mad. We can't get away. They'll make an inspection and miss me any moment."

Hank rattled off something in Spanish which Zeb did not catch and removed another brick.

Zeb seized a large slab and hauled it loose. Jacob pushed through the aperture, got to his feet. His face was the lined, tense visage of a desperate man.

He said, "I guess you're right, Hank. I cannot let Firencon take that course."

"I figger we'll bring the Governor," said Hank matter-of-factly.

"That's insane, too," said Jacob.

"He'll come," said Hank confidently. "It's about time, now. We got Conchita, her family and her friends. They'll be on our side. Then, there's the others. . . ."

"All right," said Jacob. "Come, then."

Zeb said, "Are we going to abduct the Governor?"

"Somethin' like that," grinned Hank.

"A capital idea," said Zeb. "He will probably listen to reason."

Jacob put his hand upon Zeb's big arm. He said, "My friend—you are truly my friend. Failure in this, as you know, means something worse than death."

Zeb said slowly, "I am fully prepared. I can scarcely remember a time when I was otherwise. Boston is really far away, Jacob. Tonight I had to kill two white men! Shall I stick at kidnaping a mere Governor!"

Hank chuckled aloud. "Let's get him."

They went around to the front. The sleepy guard came close enough for Hank to reach him. Hank stunned him with a blow of his fist, tied him and gagged him with his own belt and kerchief. Then they went on to the Governor's palace.

There was another guard, equally somnolent. They deposited his trussed body tenderly upon a cot to let him sleep in peace. They went into a long hallway and down to a room.

Jacob pushed open the door. There was a huge four-posted bed. And there was a lean man wearing a white nightcap.

Jacob awakened the Governor gently. Hank and Zeb stood like sentinels on either side of the bed. The Governor, his hawk nose pointing from one to the other, said equably, "Señor House! You are supposed to be in jail!"

Jacob said with great courtesy, "That is true, your excellency."

The Governor said, "My guards? My soldiers?"

Jacob said deprecatingly, "No one is severely injured. My friends and I were very careful."

"Must I dress and go out?" asked the Governor resignedly. "This will go badly with you, Señor House. No firing squad, now. Hard labor in the mines for you and your friends."

"I understand, Governor," said Jacob. "But we must ask you to accompany us."

The lean man shrugged. He was out of bed and into his clothes with remarkable despatch. He stood, a tall, thin fellow with keen, aristocratic features and a wondrous, sweeping mustache.

Jake took the lead. The strange quartet went out the front and down the street towards the dance hall. The music of the waltz came through.

Two figures emerged from the house which Hank and Zeb had watched earlier in the evening. Jacob held out his hand, motioning the others to stop. Hank and Zeb escorted the Governor out of sight.

Don Firencon was escorting a lady. Even in the night, at that distance, Zeb could see that it was a very lovely lady. She was tall and full-figured, and she disdained to wear a shawl against the cool night. Her splendid figure was clad in a black dress with flowing skirts and tight

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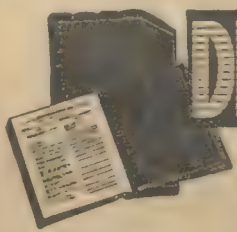

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bodice and her shoulders were glistening.

The Governor said, *"Carramba!* I begin to see a thing!"

Jacob said, "I want you to see—and hear. Will you follow with good grace, now?"

To Zeb's amazement the Governor replied, "I give you amnesity—if you give me your parole."

Jacob said sternly, "So be it."

THE Spaniard and the woman entered the dance hall. For a moment it seemed as though the music faltered. Then it began again, upon a slower note until, as Jacob and Hank and Zeb and the Governor came close, it died altogether.

Jacob halted them upon the doorstep, just out of sight of the assemblage within. Don Firencon's remembered voice came to Zeb's ears, speaking slower, in Spanish, so that Zeb could understand most of it.

"The gringos have made a plot, but it shall not succeed. You see before you Señora House. . . . She will testify by her presence in my company that Jacob House is a traitor!"

"Señora House!"

Zeb stared at Jacob.

The big man's face was intent upon the Governor, his body was crouched a little, as though to spring. His features were sharp, as though chiselled from stone and his ears seemed actually to point forward, like a terriers', for the next words.

The woman's voice was like a viol, deep and resonant. It filled the room, echoed in the ears of the four who listened.

"People of my family! My friends!" she said. "This man lies. This man came to me and threatened me, threatened to have my husband tortured if I did not come with him and tell his lies to you! The fool! My husband will not die! The Firencons will not rule Northern Mexico. It is Firencon himself who is the traitor, who plans to seek power here against our Governor!"

"You she-wolf!" screamed Firencon.

And then Jacob sprang.

He seemed to cover half the length of that long room in his first jump. Zeb and Hank were swift behind him, but not

quick enough. The Governor came with them, his voice pealing above the sudden din.

"Quiet! I command quiet! Do you not move!"

Hank's pistol was in his hand. Zeb had his tomahawk drawn and ready. The tall woman had stepped aside, and another girl had run to her side, a girl who resembled her closely in every detail. A white-haired man and two youths followed, making a family group, surrounding her. Zeb stared with goggling eyes at Señora House.

Then he remembered Jacob and the Spaniard. He turned in time to see Jacob dive under the poniard which Firencon had produced. The Don was quick, but Jacob was afire with hatred and rage.

The sharp blade stabbed. It met air as Jacob moved aside, seizing Firencon's wrist. The don tried to draw away for another slash. Jacob stood stock still, putting his other hand upon the Spaniard's elbow. For a moment they were locked so, face to face, the dark visage of the Don spitting hatred and disdain.

Then Jacob's great shoulder muscles heaved. There was a sharp, breaking sound, then the screech of Firencon as the bones in his arm gave way. The slashed, velveteeen trousers described an arc. Firencon flew through the air. He landed upon his shoulders in a corner.

A sharp-faced man held a small gun under his cloak. Zeb caught sight of the weapon. It was aimed, not at Jacob, he saw with amazement, but at the Governor. Zeb threw the tomahawk underhand, with almost no effort.

The blade flashed, then smacked with a dismal sound between the eyes of the gunman. At the same moment Hank fired at another of the conspirators. The Governor was shouting, and now the two young men moved from the group about Señora House and other gaily dressed caballeros picked victims for suddenly produced steel.

Jacob turned and rushed to the woman who awaited him. She said, "Watch them, Jacob. The Gomez family, and the Garcias. They were in it with Firencon!"

Soldiers came running, rubbing their eyes. The Governor had the short-lived

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revolt under control. Jacob patted the rounded, bare shoulder of his wife.

"It has come out all right, thanks to my friends. You must meet my friends."

There was confusion, of an orderly kind. The Governor was snapping at his men. Zeb went forward at Jacob's behest and found himself bowing over the hand of Jacob's Spanish wife.

THERE was a popping as of firecrackers when the wagons came in, the mules and oxen pushed to their fastest pace. Even Captain Gregg was smiling, doffing his hat, showing well-oiled locks of dark hair. The populace was in the street, screaming its welcome to the traders. The long whips, newly knotted for the occasion, cracked and

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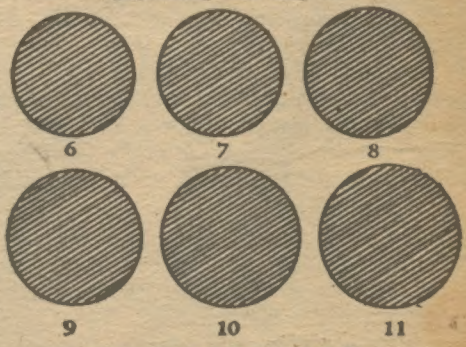

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snapped over the ears of the beasts.

In Jacob House's fine home, Zeb Stillwell lounged upon a soft divan. Jacob's beauteous wife sat near him, smiling, quietly happy in her husband's rare nearness. Across the room, Celestina Fernandez, the sister of Jacob's wife, sat demurely, careful not to look too hard or too long at the tall young blue-eyed Bostonian who had been Zebulon J. Stillwell, of Harvard College, and now was someone quite different.

"The letter came, addressed to me. She must have decided right after you left Boston," said Jacob.

Zeb read it again: "Forgive me, Jacob. If you ever see Zebulon Stillwell, ask him to forgive me also. Father insisted, and Mark is such a *strong* man. Of course, he is slightly older, but that makes him the better business man . . . ."

Elspeth had hardly waited for him to get out of town. Zeb laughed aloud. "Slightly older? Why, Mark was fifty if he was a day. He was fat around the middle!"

Jacob said, "You bear up well, Zeb!"

Jacob's hand was on his wife's shoulder, caressing it. She turned and kissed him full on the lips, laughing gaily.

Zeb said, "I seem to have made two thousand dollars on my wagon, after paying Hatfield Charlie. Could I build a house here for that?"

"Why should you want a house?" demanded Jacob.

Jacob's wife placed her palm over his mouth. The girl, Celestina, gathered up her sewing and fled precipitately.

"Already?" exclaimed Jacob.

"Hank is going to marry Conchita," explained Zeb unashamedly. "I am sending to Boston for what money I have. Then Hank and I are going to trap in the Rockies while the girls keep our homes for us."

Jacob said, "But you're rich! You don't need to trap beaver!"

"So are you," said Zeb with great tranquility. "Aren't you coming with us?"

"Yes," said Jacob. His hand slipped from his wife's shoulder and doubled into a fist. "Yes. Of course I'm coming."

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☐ Business Management
☐ Cartooning ☐ Civil Service
☐ College Preparatory
☐ Commercial
☐ Commercial Illustrating
☐ Cost Accounting
☐ C. P. Accounting
☐ First Year College
☐ Foremanship ☐ French
☐ Good English
☐ High School
☐ Managing Men at Work
☐ Railway Postal Clerk
☐ Salesmanship
☐ Secretarial ☐ Spanish
☐ Showcard and Sign Lettering
☐ Traffic Management

HOME ECONOMICS COURSES

☐ Advanced Dressmaking
☐ Foods and Cookery
☐ Home Dressmaking
☐ Professional Dressmaking and Designing
☐ Tea Room and Cafeteria Management, Catering

Name..... Age..... Address.....

City..... State..... Present Position.....

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